



PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

Exhibit 9

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Bec Mac: Hi. Bec Mac here with the fake art campaign, still in Western Australia, and the places I'm finding myself quite recently are remarkable, because I'm now in the office of the Western Australian Museum's CEO, and here he is, right here. Hello. How are you?

Alec Coles: How are you? Nice to see you. I'm Alec Coles. I'm the CEO here at the WA Museum. On my left is my colleague Dee Fitzgerald.

Bec Mac: Hi, Dee. How are you?

Deanne Fitzgerald: I'm good, thank you.

Bec Mac: What's your role here?

Deanne Fitzgerald: So I'm the Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Adviser to the Western Australian Museum. Yes, so I've got a—it turns out I've got a big job! Ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Deanne Fitzgerald: As well as the long title.

Bec Mac: Well, that's a positive thing, because what is the responsibility of—like, museums' roles are changing over time and around, I guess, their responsibility to Indigenous artwork and the legacy that you hold. What's your role in that, do you perceive?

Alec Coles: Oh, look, it's absolutely key to the museum's role in every sense, and I still—a friend of mine is Greg Lehman down in Tasmania. Greg I always remember at a conference saying, 'The spirit of terra nullius lurks beneath the floorboards of every Australian museum,' and I think we've got a real responsibility to blow that away. And really—I mean, Dee's appointment, or certainly the creation of that position about five years ago, was part of an ongoing commitment by the museum to really recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's first people, and it's critical to what we do. And we're developing a new museum here. It's one of the biggest cultural projects in the Southern Hemisphere—probably the biggest, at the moment, infrastructure project. And, you know, it is key that Aboriginal voices and creativity are central to all of that, and no longer, you know, will we partition that or silo it. You know, this is everybody's museum, and it belongs to everybody, and it's everybody's story.

Bec Mac: And, Dee, how have you seen the evolution of museums' roles even in the last 20 years in relationship to that conversation?

Deanne Fitzgerald: I think we're in a good position now with, like Alec said, the new museum build, that we can actually go out and start speaking to the community and saying: 'This is your museum. Yes, we have your collections here, but we want you to come and tell us how they best should be put up, put on display, and what stories do you want to tell about your objects.' So it's not us taking that ownership, saying: 'We have these objects. We think this is the story that should be told.' We're going back out to the community and asking it, because it's their objects. It's their stories as well, which is important, and that's how you get those stronger connections to the objects, connection to the stories, to the people themselves. And it's also about that ownership as well. Once they see their stuff in there, our stories are in there—'Well, this is my museum as well.' And that's the main thing for a museum, I think, and that's what we're doing.

Bec Mac: I guess the longest history in the world as a culture to tell—I mean, that is an incredible, exciting prospect.

Alec Coles: It's an amazing opportunity, and I think one of the ways I've put is we've just got to look at our heritage through a different lens. Somewhere like Perth, you know—understandably, people get very emotional about, you know, old buildings. By that they mean things that were built maybe in the 1800s. We've knocked a lot of them down here. But, of course, the real history, the long history, is right across our state and is right across Perth, and it's not always manifest in buildings and whatever; it's manifest in all kinds of other ways. And to us that's the unique thing. That's about the first peoples here, and those are the people who understand this land, and we need to respect that.

Bec Mac: Absolutely. And so, I guess, putting first nations first in the historical conversation is absolutely crucial.

Deanne Fitzgerald: Exactly, and I think Australia is in that position of saying: 'Well, we've got the oldest living cultural group in the world. Let's own it.'

Bec Mac: Yes.

Deanne Fitzgerald: 'You know, don't worry about Egypt and their Pyramids.'

Bec Mac: Yes—ha, ha, ha, ha!

Deanne Fitzgerald: 'They're only 4,000 years old. Who cares?' Yeah, exactly. So, you know, Australia owns this, and we want to share it. As Aboriginal people, we want to share this with the rest of Australia as well.

Bec Mac: Yes, exciting. So, in reference to all that context, how do you see the fake art—the impact of what it has on community?

Alec Coles: Well, look, I think, you know, it's one of these issues where you kind of always have to be careful what you wish for, in a sense, and obviously there's been a huge, I guess, explosion in interest in Aboriginal art, which is fantastic, and it's hugely important not only culturally but economically to a lot of Aboriginal communities. The downside—and it's inevitable; I mean, whether it's a downside or not, it's going to happen—is that everybody wants to cash in on that, and I think that's the problem. Once you find, you know, a way of expressing an artistic, creative process that becomes popularised in any way or becomes commercialised then, you know, you're going to get humbug. You're going to get people coming in from outside, and I think this is obviously a real problem.

You know, we constantly observe that you can go around tourist shops all over Australia and buy, you know, supposedly Aboriginal materials that, you know, are made all over. You know, we know where they're made: in South-East Asia and the like. And it is—it's fake in every sense. I guess every culture has suffered it at some point, and now, because of the interest and the popularity of true Aboriginal art, everybody else is cashing in. And, of course, the problem is with all of that you get this mass-produced stuff that, firstly, has no cultural value. It has no kind of meaning, in a sense, but they knock it off at ridiculous prices. So, you know, people have a choice. They can take that home and think they've had an authentic experience, which of course they haven't had, you know, rather than actually paying the right price for the right art from somebody who's created it authentically.

Bec Mac: And what do you, what's your—because you'd have a different insight into the impact on community.

Deanne Fitzgerald: Yeah. So Alec did talk about the economic side of things, but I think for me, with the artwork, it's the stories that are connected to it. They're actually lost once they're mass-produced somewhere else, and that's somebody's personal story that's going on that board. I've got family members who do artwork and paint, and, you know, that's them. It's them on that piece of artwork and, if you're going to start mass-producing this, all of that gets lost. And as—you know, as artists, Aboriginal people as artists, that connection to our country and land, that's what we're mainly painting about. So even that story's going as well. So yeah.

Bec Mac: If—like, this is going to parliament. There is going to be a Senate inquiry. Do you think it's crucial that there becomes legislation and there's laws put in place to protect Aboriginal art and culture from—particularly souvenirs are a major problem.

Alec Coles: Yeah. Look, I think that is desirable. I mean, I'm not a lawyer and I know how difficult it is to actually develop legislation that actually does what you want it to do but also excludes, you know, the people you want excluded from that. But if it can be done it should be done, because, you know, in a sense this is part of the—you know, it's the unique heritage of this place. As Dee has said, it's the unique stories of those people, and we've always, from a museum point of view—you know, we use the word 'share' all the time. We don't tell people's stories; we let them share their stories with us, and they have to have the agency in that. And the minute that you start, again, as Dee has said, mass-producing that, people lose that agency. And, you know, if that can be protected it should be, because it is scandalous, and we know—you know, I don't want to dwell on the economic side, but it is an important economic fact of life for Aboriginal people. It has huge, you know, potential to benefit communities, and if we just take that away by allowing people to rip it off then, you know, we're just not doing our job.

Bec Mac: And within that, what you were talking about—also around the stories and people's actual lives and stories being, in a way, robbed—can you suggest anything to the way the law should be created?

Deanne Fitzgerald: I think the main thing, if we're taking this to legislation—like I was saying, the connection to land and country is such an important aspect of Aboriginal culture, so it's enough that the land was taken away to start with.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Deanne Fitzgerald: Then allowing people to take away those stories that are in the paintings—it's just doing that again.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Deanne Fitzgerald: So if we're changing this and putting protection on then at least artists still have some sort of link and connection back to their country and back to their land, which they're telling their story about. So I

think if we don't do this then we're still—we're still removing people from land and country. Yeah. So that's the way I'm, you know, looking at it.

Alec Coles: I was going to say it'd take, kind of, cleverer people than me to work out how that legislation should work, because you've got all this issue about, you know, so-called Aboriginal influenced art, you know, and so often that's a kind of furphy that goes in there—that somebody says, 'Well, you know, yeah, but we said it was influenced rather than the real thing,' but of course somebody buying that never kind of really looks into the background of it. So there are a whole range of those grey areas that are going to need to be sorted and the loopholes that going to need to be tightened, but I just sincerely hope somebody does it, because, you know, in a sense, you would argue, finally, we've given—you know, we're actually allowing Aboriginal people the agency to express themselves and to benefit from that, and then we're kind of taking it away again.

Bec Mac: Yeah, yeah. So what can we do more about to support and to promote the genuine creation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders arts?

Deanne Fitzgerald: I actually tell my friends: 'Don't go to the shops and buy them. Buy them from the artists themselves if you can.' And in WA we've got a number of Aboriginal art centres where you can actually go and purchase, and I've done that back at home in Geraldton with the art centres up there—purchased artwork from the artist. And that's the message we should be telling people, you know. And if you do pick up a piece and you see it's made somewhere else then just put it back and don't continue supporting it.

Bec Mac: Yes. Have you got anything to add to that around how we can support and promote genuine Aboriginal art?

Alec Coles: Well, it's either going direct to the creator—the artist themselves—or actually making sure that you've got accredited suppliers that you work with. And that's something we have to deal with through our retail area as well.

Bec Mac: Yeah, because you'd have souvenir shops.

Alec Coles: Of course we do, yeah, and so you'd be glad to know I checked when I knew you were coming, to make—

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha! Well, I'll be looking. I'm going down to have a look—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Alec Coles: I'm sure you will, you know, to make sure, again, that it's all ethically sourced and, you know, either direct from the—so I think that, when we met yesterday, I mentioned all the work we take from the Tjanpi Desert Weavers and sell direct.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Alec Coles: So, I mean, that's one of the—you know, it's just an example of the kind of work that we do deal with. But, you know—

Bec Mac: Even in that, you said people do say, 'Well, this is so expensive,' but you had a good response to that.

Alec Coles: Yeah, well, I mean, I think that's the point. You know, the danger is that people will look at that and they'll—you know, they will have been in one of the souvenir shops and think, 'Oh, yeah, I want to take something home.' But everything the museum's about and everything, you know, we're talking about here is about authenticity. And, you know, do you want the real thing or do you want something that, as Dee has said, you know, has no cultural value? It has no story attached to it, and actually it's just—it is ripping people off. Yes, exactly.

Bec Mac: And often it's not even made in Australia, so it's even weirder. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Alec Coles: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's exactly right. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I don't want to name countries, but we all know where we're talking about—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: So, as a community, what more can we do? I mean, asking the question, 'Who made it?' And is there anything else you want to add to what we can actually do ourselves to make sure we're not supporting fake art?

Deanne Fitzgerald: I guess supporting stuff like this and allowing people to know that this is happening and it's out there. Also—like, I mean, I went to Sydney and to the Paddington Markets and walked through there. It's just packed full of all of these mass-produced objects from, you know, those other countries, so you either go and tell them that you shouldn't be selling this or you just don't continue to support them and don't buy the products from them, yeah, or you just check: where do they come from? Yeah. Ask the question, yeah.

Bec Mac: Have you got anything to add to what we can do more as a community?

Alec Coles: I think, you know, there is a cultural thing here, and, I mean, it's a stupid and facile comparison but, yeah, we've had this issue for a long time. You know, people won't buy organic food because it's more expensive, so, you know, 'I'll buy the cheap stuff.' And obviously everybody deals with economic realities of life but, you know, when you're buying art, you know, again, what is it you want sitting, you know, in your lounge or hanging on your wall? Do you want something that actually is meaningless, or do you want something that's meaningful? And I think so often—and it's usually whether you're dealing direct with the artist or, indeed, with the suppliers. You can actually, I suppose, investigate those stories. You can interrogate those stories, and it gives everything so much more of a deeper meaning, and actually that's what adds the value to it. But I think it is partly cultural in that we need to sort of move away from, you know, the mass-produced attitude—you know, stack them high, sell them cheap—to actually—you know, if we're purchasing art, it's because it's authentic, and I do think it's a cultural thing that we'll just have to keep working on.

Bec Mac: Yes, exactly. And, just quickly, when is the new museum ready?

Deanne Fitzgerald: 2020.

Bec Mac: 2020. Is it looking amazing? Excited?

Alec Coles: Oh, we're very excited.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Alec Coles: It is really amazing on the illustration. It's looking like a big hole in the ground at the moment.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha!

Alec Coles: But it's going to be—yeah. Like, it is—it's a \$400 million project. I keep saying—and we're live on Facebook now, so there's plenty of that. I've said that I think it's the largest cultural infrastructure project in the Southern Hemisphere by dollar. I've said that for three years. Nobody's contradicted me yet, but now's your chance.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Alec Coles: So, yeah, we're very excited about it. There's nothing like it. You know, I don't think there's anything like it in the world at the moment. I just think we're so lucky to have this opportunity. But, you know, coming back to what we're talking about, it is everybody's museum. We have done, I believe—and Dee, you know, will either back me up or disagree—

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Alec Coles: I think we've done more consultation not just with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but with all communities, but particularly in those Aboriginal communities across WA—we've done more consultation ahead of this than I can imagine anybody's ever done for a cultural institution before. And so this is all about, as we say, a museum that is owned, used, valued by Western Australians and admired by the world. And I've been encouraged by the number of times I've spoken to, you know, land councils and other Aboriginal groups and they've said, 'You know, this is our museum too.' And that's so important because, you know, I hope dearly that at some point WA will get an Aboriginal cultural centre. You know, there's been a lot of talk about it. I mean, there are a lot of smaller ones, but there's talk about a big one down on the river there. That would be fantastic. We must never forget that the museum is everybody's museum, you know. It's not a whitefellas' museum. It belongs to everybody.

Bec Mac: Fantastic. Have you got anything to add to that, Dee?

Deanne Fitzgerald: Everybody come. When it's built, everyone come and visit. Like I said, it's everyone's museum, like Alec was saying, and in particular our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community—come along and have a look at the objects that are going to be in there as well. It's going to be amazing.

Bec Mac: I can't wait—ha, ha! Thank you so much. It's been awesome to be here. Thank you. Thank you.