HONEST HISTORY

Honest History Association Inc.

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on
the National Capital and External Territories
Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions

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Summary

National institutions should be managed efficiently and effectively, treated equitably by government, and be properly accountable to the Parliament for their actions.

The Inquiry should avoid recommending the replication of strategies across institutions unless it first undertakes a thorough examination of how these strategies are working at present.

While ambitious public outreach programming is commendable, it has the risk that institutions undertaking it lose sight of, or lack the resources to properly carry out, their core functions.

Marketing also risks over-claiming. This has been evident in the slogans used by the Australian War Memorial.

There are clearly benefits in Canberra-based institutions joining forces in 'roadshows', making carefully selected and complementary exhibits available outside the capital.

It would be bizarre if the Australian War Memorial's bid for $500 million to pay for an extra 5000 square metres, most of which would be parking space for large pieces of military kit, were to reduce the funding available to other national institutions for digitisation.

It will be important to have agreed methodology for measuring the success of funding efforts. Misleading figures should not be used to support a funding case.

National institutions should each develop and publish a code of practice for public and corporate donations to the institution.

It would be worth exploring the feasibility of a government guarantee of a set proportion of government funding for national institutions.

There is a need to regularly review the appropriateness of the placement of institutions within portfolios. The Australian War Memorial should be returned to the Arts portfolio.

Governments need to regularly review the appropriateness of the membership of governing councils and the consonance of institutions' holdings with today's multicultural Australia.

The corporate planning process should not be used to narrow or broaden the institution's remit as set out in its enabling legislation.

There is a need to ensure accountability to Parliament, through accurate Annual Reports and adequate consideration of institutions in Estimates Committees.

There is no justification for allocating funding between national institutions on the grounds that some are more worthy, or more crucial to the national psyche, or more 'sacred', than others.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION I: Government should require each national institution to develop and publish a code of practice for public and corporate donations to the institution (paras 19-21).

RECOMMENDATION II: Government should explore the feasibility of a government guarantee of a set proportion of government funding for national institutions (para 22).

RECOMMENDATION III: Government should regularly review the appropriateness of the placement of institutions within portfolios (paras 23-26).

RECOMMENDATION IV: Government should return the Australian War Memorial to the Arts portfolio (para 27).

RECOMMENDATION V: Governments should regularly review the appropriateness of the membership of governing councils and the consonance of institutions' holdings with today's multicultural Australia (paras 28-29).

RECOMMENDATION VI: Portfolio ministers should ensure that the corporate planning process is not used to narrow or broaden the institution's remit as set out in its enabling legislation (para 30).

RECOMMENDATION VII: Parliament should pay particular attention to the accuracy of institutions' annual reports (para 31).

RECOMMENDATION VIII: Estimates Committees should extend the time they devote to national institutions (paras 32-33).

RECOMMENDATION IX: The JSCNET should explicitly reject the notion that some national institutions are more 'sacred' than others (paras 36-38).

RECOMMENDATION X: The JSCNET should state the principle of equity between national institutions, with institutions' funding differing only according to how efficiently the institution has spent its money, how well it is achieving its objectives, and the probity of its activities (para 38).

Introduction

Themes and perspective

1. Honest History welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry. Two key themes of the submission are:

- *efficiency* in the funding of national institutions, that is, the optimum use of money provided by government and other sources;
- *effectiveness* in achieving the desired outcomes of national institutions, as set out in their legislation.

2. Beyond efficiency and effectiveness, however, there is a need to achieve *equity* between national institutions, given that each of them has a role in maintaining and nurturing Australia's national history and heritage. Finally, there should be *accountability*, to ensure transparency and best practice in the discharge of institutions' functions.

3. The submission is written from the perspective of users of national institutions, and constructive critics of a particular institution, the Australian War Memorial, whose recent history has lessons applicable to other institutions. Of all the national institutions, it is the War Memorial which features disproportionately in the media and public discourse, positively and negatively. Close analysis of its role is essential but does not happen often enough.

Honest History

4. Honest History is an incorporated association under the laws of the Australian Capital Territory. It seeks balanced history, where contesting, evidence-based interpretations are available to students, teachers, universities, journalists and the public, and history is not misused to serve political or other agendas.

5. Honest History is managed by a committee.[1] Its current president is Professor Frank Bongiorno of the Australian National University and its immediate past president is Professor Peter Stanley of UNSW Canberra. It has a number of distinguished supporters, including leading Australian historians.[2] It has more than 1900 followers on Twitter and 1100 followers on Facebook. Its website has more than 14 000 unique visitors a month and its regular newsletter goes to 1000 addresses.

6. *The Honest History Book*[3] was published in April 2017, making the case that 'Australia is more than Anzac – and always has been'. Chapter authors included Douglas Newton, Carolyn

Holbrook, Michael Piggott AM, Frank Bongiorno, Mark Dapin, Stuart Macintyre AO, Carmen Lawrence, Peter Stanley, Paul Daley, Larissa Behrendt, Alison Broinowski and David Stephens.

7. This submission was compiled by members of the Honest History committee, co-ordinated by its secretary, Dr David Stephens. Dr Stephens and other members of the committee would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry.

Comments on terms of reference

General comment

8. We note that the Inquiry's Terms of Reference (ToR) stress brand development, public engagement, outreach, and seeking private sector support. All of these strategies are clearly important – and we will comment on them shortly – but we do not believe institutions' pursuit of them and success *at* them can provide a justification for governments to avoid the funding responsibility that they assumed when the institutions were established.

9. Some institutions are already pursuing innovative brand development, engagement, outreach and sponsorship strategies. These strategies, however, may not always be models of best practice. The Inquiry should avoid recommending the replication of strategies across institutions unless it first undertakes a thorough examination of how these strategies are working at present.

ToR 1-3: creating a strong brand and online presence; experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation; conducting outreach outside of Canberra

Flawed public relations strategies

10. Most, if not all, national institutions have public relations strategies and websites. All reach out to school groups and advertise to tourists, domestic and international. Some of them send exhibits on tour around Australia, as the Australian War Memorial did with *The Spirit of Anzac* [4]and the National Museum is doing with *Torres Strait masks*[5].

11. While ambitious public outreach programming is commendable, it carries the risk that institutions undertaking it lose sight of, or lack the resources to properly carry out, their core functions. This may occur, for example, with websites which are a triumph of the latest design trend but are very difficult for occasional users to navigate, or travelling exhibitions which take an institution's holdings out of context, or whose content is chosen for its entertainment value rather than representativeness.

12. Marketing also risks over-claiming. This has been evident in the slogans used by the Australian War Memorial. For example, its slogan from about 2014 to 2017, 'Every nation has its story. This is our story', boasted that Australia had *just one story*, the one told by the Memorial. The fact that, at the same time and still, the National Museum of Australia had the slogan, 'Where our stories come alive' – stories, plural – implicitly pointed to the exaggeration in the Memorial's claim.

Institutional collaboration

13. While the Inquiry should avoid recommending the replication of questionable branding and outreach practices, there are clearly benefits (reduced overheads, mutual reinforcement of messages across institutions, availability of online resources to back up physical presence) in institutions joining forces in 'roadshows', making carefully selected and complementary exhibits available throughout the country.

14. Increased institutional collaboration, including the use of technology, was favoured as far back as *Creative Nation* in 1994.[6] Digitisation has been a priority for cultural institutions for a number of years. 'The reasons for this can range from the preservation of fragile or at-risk material to (more commonly) *the potential a digitised collection offers the institution to better fulfil its goal of making its collection accessible to its users*' (emphasis added).[7]

Digitisation and a bunker

15. Better funding of digitisation is likely to be a strong theme in institutions' submissions to the Inquiry. Digitisation needs to be put in context, though: it would surely be bizarre if the Australian War Memorial's bid for $500 million to pay for an extra 5000 square metres[8], most of which would be used as parking space for large pieces of military kit, were to reduce the funding available to other national institutions for digitisation.

16. The Memorial's 'big new bunker' proposal is hard to justify, either as an efficient use of money or as furthering the Memorial's objectives, as set out in the functions section of its Act[9]. Chinooks, Black Hawks and FA/18s are a small part of Australia's war history, compared with say, the impacts of war on Australian families over more than a century (including families affected today by PTSD).

Measurement methodology

17. Whatever money is spent on branding, engagement and outreach it will be important to have agreed methodology for measuring success. It is reasonable, though, that preference in Budget funding, above minimum levels, should go to institutions which are making an effort to build and maintain their markets.

18. Misleading figures should not be used to support a funding case, however. In this context, there is evidence that the War Memorial has been (at the least) careless in presenting usage figures for its website. Its statistics for actual, physical visitors to the Memorial also tend to be presented in a triumphalist fashion, when analysis shows that its visitor numbers, as a proportion of Australia's population, have been pretty much constant for more than 25 years.[10]

ToR 4-5: cultivating private sector support; developing other income streams

Donation ethics and transparency

19. Eagerness to tap corporate funding sources should be accompanied by best practice in ethics and transparency. National institutions should each develop and publish a code of practice for public and corporate donations to the institution. This would clarify what donors may receive in terms of recognition and other benefits in return for their contributions.

20. The representatives of two corporate donors to the Australian War Memorial – Boeing and Kingold – received Memorial Fellowships (plaques, ceremonially awarded and accompanied by an inscription on the Memorial's wall). But the Memorial needs to clarify the process by which such recognition is granted, whether it is available to other donors and, if so, what scale of donation might lead to such recognition.

21. It is our very strong view that greater transparency in these matters is required, including full disclosure of the amounts donated. National institutions also need to perform due diligence on donors to ensure that their conduct and character meet the standards of probity expected in Australian public life, and that they do not constitute a security risk.[11]

Government's funding responsibility

22. It is important to maintain the balance between external and government funding. Institutions that preserve and protect a nation's history and heritage deserve a level of Budget funding commensurate with their functions and responsibilities, regardless of their success in

raising money *outside the Budget*. It would be worth exploring the feasibility of a government guarantee of a set proportion of government funding for national institutions.

ToR 6: ensuring the appropriateness of governance structures

Portfolio placement is important

23. There is a need to regularly review the appropriateness of the placement of institutions within portfolios. This has a clear implication for funding: the more institutions that come within a portfolio the more competition there is likely to be between them for funding, with the portfolio minister having to do some prioritising between his or her institutions, even before Budget discussions with other ministers.

24. Conversely, where there is a *single* national institution within a portfolio, like the War Memorial within the Veterans' Affairs portfolio, there is less need for the portfolio minister to trim fat before bids go forward. When the Budget process moves on to discussions *between* ministers, there may be a tendency for items like annual funding increases for the War Memorial to be 'waved through' as a trade-off for items in other portfolios.

The Anzac effect

25. The historical record shows that the War Memorial was brought under the Veterans' Affairs portfolio after the prime minister of the day was lobbied by the national president of the RSL.[12] The Memorial seems to have had an inside track on funding ever since.[13] Other institutions have also gone 'against the flow' of Budget strategy, following 'special deals', or, on the other hand, have had to fight to reverse unjustifiably harsh decisions.[14]

26. Historian Peter Cochrane suggested another reason the Memorial tends to do better than its sister institutions: 'Drape "Anzac" over an argument and, like a magic cloak, the argument is sacrosanct'.[15] Motivations for funding decisions for other institutions are not always so clear. Historical machinery of government arrangements – or special deals between mates or former colleagues – should not lead to perverse funding outcomes.

27. To reduce any unfair advantage the War Memorial enjoys, it should be returned to the Arts portfolio, where its funding claims can be matched with those of other cultural bodies – and any alleged 'sacred' status can be taken into consideration by a minister who is also being pressed directly by the 'profane' bodies in his or her portfolio.

Councils – and institutions' holdings – should look like the nation they serve

28. The governing councils or boards of national institutions should include more members who are regular users of the institution or who are representative of the broad Australian community, and fewer members who hold their positions ex officio or as a reward for donor largesse.[16]

29. Governments need to regularly review the appropriateness of the membership of governing councils – by amending legislation, if necessary. This should be extended into a broader consideration covering, for example, the consonance of institutions' holdings with today's multicultural Australia. It should not be possible in 2018 to characterise Australian national institutions as Anglo-Celtic trophy rooms.

Corporate plans should reflect institutions' enabling legislation

30. Legislation sets out the intentions of the Parliament regarding the scope and objectives of national institutions. The corporate planning process – while it is an essential tool of management – should not be used to narrow or broaden the institution's remit. The Australian War Memorial seems to have narrowed its area of interest considerably from what its legislation says, *the history of wars* in which Australia has been involved being shaved back to the *Australian experience of war*, which is rather a different thing – wars involve at least two 'sides'.[17]

Accountability to Parliament

31. There is a need to ensure accountability to Parliament, through accurate Annual Reports and adequate consideration of institutions in Estimates Committees. Honest History exhaustively analysed two successive Annual Reports from the War Memorial and found serious errors, including repetition of words and statistics from one year's report in the following year's report, when the information was clearly out-of-date.[18]

32. National institutions have tended in recent years to receive perfunctory consideration from Estimates Committees. For example, in the 2017 Budget Estimates hearings, the National Library took up just 25 minutes, the War Memorial 21 minutes, and five other national institutions between 13 and 17 minutes each.[19]

33. These compressed time frames should be extended. At present, they seriously limit both the opportunity of the institution to explain the impacts on it of current funding (or lack of it)

and the time for the Committee to ask appropriate questions. A 'wave through' atmosphere again prevails – or one where Senators say, in effect, 'thank you for your efforts, and see you next time'.

Other matters, including the process for establishing new institutions

34. All of the points above are relevant to the setting up of new institutions. Institutions should be established by a process which ensures the institution acts efficiently and effectively, with a council that represents both its direct constituency and Australians as a whole, in accordance with its legislation, and abiding by principles of accountability and transparency.

35. New institutions should be placed in the portfolio that deals most closely with their subject matter, with 'heritage' or 'history' or 'culture' as the common denominator, even if there is a preceding adjective, such as 'military' or 'Indigenous'. This suggests the Arts portfolio as the most appropriate location for most such institutions.

Conclusion

36. National institutions are all established by Act of Parliament or other government decision. There is no justification for allocating funding between them on the grounds that some are more worthy, or more crucial to the national psyche, or more 'sacred' than others.

37. Occasionally, the Australian War Memorial attracts the adjective 'sacred', but this seems increasingly anachronistic in an age far removed from the two World Wars and an Australia whose people are drawn from two hundred countries. Anzac may still be a secular religion for some Australians, but it is not the established church; other Australians have the right to be atheist or agnostic about it. And that includes governments.

38. There should be equity between national institutions, with their funding differing only according to how efficiently an institution has spent its money, how well it is achieving its objectives, and the probity of its activities. No national institution is 'sacred'; they all deserve to be cherished and nurtured.

Endnotes

[1] 'The Honest History committee', http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/about-us/#structure . All websites visited 29 April to 3 May 2018.
[2] 'Supporters', http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/about-us/#supporters .
[3] David Stephens & Alison Broinowski, ed., *The Honest History Book*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2017.
[4] 'Spirit of Anzac Centenary Experience', https://www.awm.gov.au/index.php/about/our-work/projects/spirit-anzac-centenary-experience .
[5] 'Evolution: Torres Strait masks', http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/evolution-travelling .
[6] 'Creative Nation: Commonwealth cultural policy, October 1994', http://apo.org.au/node/29704 .
[7] Wendy Davis & Katherine Howard, 'Cultural policy and Australia's national cultural heritage: issues and challenges in the GLAM landscape', *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 62, no. 1, March 2013, p. 23, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2013.774684 .
[8] Doug Dingwall & Tom McIlroy, 'Federal budget 2017: War Memorial and Museum think big with budget funding boost', *Canberra Times*, 10 May 2017, https://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/act/federal-budget-2017-war-memorial-and-museum-think-big-with-budget-funding-boost-20170510-gw1iit.html ; Andrew Greene, 'Underground Australian War Memorial expansion tipped to top $500 million', *ABC News*, 7 April 2018, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-07/underground-war-memorial-expansion-tipped-to-top-500-million/9627910 .
[9] *Australian War Memorial Act 1980*, sec. 5, http://www7.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol_act/awma1980244/s5.html .
[10] David Stephens, '"Visitation" numbers at the Australian War Memorial since 1991: is this joint really jumpin'?', *Honest History*, 2 February 2016 updated, http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/stephens-david-visitation-numbers-at-the-australian-war-memorial-since-1991/ ; 'Cooking the (visitors) books: the Australian War Memorial struggles with statistics – again', *Honest History*, 7 February 2017, http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/stephens-david-cooking-the-visitors-books-the-australian-war-memorial-struggles-with-statistics-again/ .
[11] More details can be found on the Honest History website, http://honesthistory.net.au , using the Search engine with relevant terms such as 'Boeing', 'Fellowship', and 'Kingold'.
[12] Michael McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial, 1917–1990*, University of Queensland Press with the Australian War Memorial, Brisbane, 1991, pp. 328–31. Prime Minister Hawke made the change after discussion with his good friend, the then national president of the RSL, Sir William Keys.
[13] 'Villers-Bretonneux boondoggle survives blunt Budget axe', *Honest History*, 16 December 2015 updated, http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/villers-bretonneux-boondoggle-survives-blunt-budget-axe/ .
[14] Compare: the success of AIATSIS in getting a special deal; the struggle by the National Library to reverse a decision affecting the much-used and valuable TROVE service: 'AIATSIS welcomes funding boost', *AIATSIS*, 29 April 2015, http://aiatsis.gov.au/news-and-events/news/aiatsis-welcomes-funding-boost ; 'National Library of Australia's TROVE service gets $16.4 million in funding in MYEFO update', *ABC News*, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-20/national-library-of-australia-gets-funding-for-trove-in-myefo/8136738 .
[15] Peter Cochrane, 'The past is not sacred: the "history wars" over Anzac', *The Conversation*, 25 April 2015, https://theconversation.com/the-past-is-not-sacred-the-history-wars-over-anzac-38596 .
[16] See, for example: David Stephens, 'Keepers of the flame: why do the people who control our war memorials look so different from the rest of us and why does this matter?' *Honest History*, 7 June 2016, http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/stephens-david-keepers-of-the-flame-making-war-memorial-councils-more-representative/ .
[17] David Stephens, 'Parochial commemoration of war', *Pearls and Irritations*, 23 April 2014, http://johnmenadue.com/david-stephens-parochial-commemoration/ . The article refers to the Memorial's 2011-14 Corporate Plan but the words are the same in the 2017-18 version: https://www.awm.gov.au/about/organisation/corporate/corporate-plan-2017-2018 .
[18] Stephens, 'Cooking the (visitors) books' (see note 10 above).

[19] Parliament of Australia, Hansard, Senate Standing Committees, Environment and Communications, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 24 May, 30 May 2017. The five other institutions were the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Gallery, the National Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery.