

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, Inquiry into the administration of the National Memorials Ordinance 1928

By the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia)

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The Medical Association for Prevention of War congratulates the Australian government for conducting this inquiry, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to it.

MAPW's goal is the prevention of armed conflict, and the promotion of peaceful means of conflict resolution. Our interest in this inquiry is therefore to advocate for measures to help ensure that Australia's memorials do not serve to strengthen the role of warfare in our national life and identity, but rather simply serve their proper and important purpose of honouring our war dead. This submission will not address all the terms of reference of the inquiry, but only those which relate to these goals.

We however note that the terms of reference are relatively narrow given the context in which this inquiry has arisen - namely a specific proposal for two new war memorials in Canberra, which has proven deeply unpopular and the subject of severe criticism from very diverse quarters. In addition, the decision-making process which nurtured it has also come under fire as being severely flawed to the point of being illegitimate. Under those circumstances one might have expected the Committee to seek views on that specific proposal, to ensure that it is open to a rigorous and transparent process of evaluation by the whole community. The terms of reference are therefore disappointing, and appear to leave open the possibility that illegitimate decisions that might have already been made in relation to that proposal will be unaffected by the inquiry. We urge that the current war memorial proposal not escape the requirements of public consultation, transparency and other aspects of good process simply by virtue of "getting in ahead" of possible changes to the administration of the Ordinance.

MAPW offers the following summary and comments on some of the terms of reference.

Summary of MAPW recommendations:

- Previous decisions in relation to the proposal for new memorials to the world wars should be rescinded. They have been taken in secret, are undemocratic and therefore do not honour our war dead. They are strongly opposed by the vast majority of the public.
- Membership of the CNMC should reflect the breadth of Australian society and achievements, by the inclusion of experts from diverse disciplines such as history, education, aboriginal affairs and others. Expansion of the Committee should be considered, or other mechanisms that allow input from a range of disciplines.
- Public participation early in decision-making relating to new memorial proposals is essential. Mechanisms must be implemented that ensure early, genuine and full consultation with the public in the development of memorial proposals.
- Parliamentary approval should be required for new national memorials.

Membership of the Canberra National Memorials Committee (CNMC)

The membership of the Committee should be very diverse, to reflect different views and opinions on what is important in our national life. While Canberra's memorials do include a very small number dedicated to non-military events or people, it is our military memorials that currently dominate our commemorative space, with approximately 3 dozen war memorials (and two more very large ones planned). This lack of diversity does not reflect the many varied beliefs as to which parts of our history and identity we value most dearly.

What we choose to commemorate says a lot about how we see ourselves as a nation, and the aspirations we wish to inspire in young Australians who visit (or live in) Canberra. This point alone makes the role of the CNMC extremely important in guiding the development of memorials that contribute to a positive future for all Australians, especially young Australians.

Memorials perform not only a commemorative role, but also an educative role for Australians of all ages. While the Australian War Memorial, (and, to a lesser extent, the other war memorials in ANZAC Parade) instruct visitors in the ways of warfare - its dates, its participants, its horrors, its heroes etc - there is no equivalent institution to instruct young and old Australians in the promotion of peace, and Australia's role. For example, do most Australians know what Australia did to strengthen the United Nations in its early days, or what Australia has done in other spheres to promote peace? Is there widespread awareness of the fact that Australia led the world in introducing votes for women? Who are the heroes in these endeavours? Which potential wars have been averted by skilled diplomacy, and by whom? If our public monuments are any guide, it is war rather than peace that is presented to young Australians as a defining part of our history.

As an illustration of this point, the memorial to the work of the United Nations, adjacent to the National Library, is small and situated in a relatively inconspicuous location. Despite its importance, it is clearly not intended to present the same central focus as our memorials to warfare which dominate Canberra's most beautiful and prominent vista.

In addition, our memorials form a significant part of the image we promote to overseas visitors to our capital. Do we want others to see Australia as a warlike nation, or as a nation that promotes, above all, cooperation at all levels with our neighbours and the wider global community? If it is the latter, that is not apparent in our national memorials currently.

This is not to argue against war memorials per se; they play an important and unique role in our national life. But it is to argue that our commemoration of warfare has become disproportionate, overshadowing all the contributions to human wellbeing that Australia has made in other spheres of life. Any future memorials therefore should be planned in full consideration of the impact they will have on our national identity, as seen by both Australians and overseas visitors, and on the aspirations of our young people.

There is an additional consideration. There should also be place in our memorials for recognition that this land has been inhabited for many thousands of years, with white colonisation being a late, and violent, part of that history. Indeed, if there is any missing element in the commemoration of Australia's military history, it is the "frontier wars" by which colonisation took place.

Membership of the CNMC should reflect the breadth of Australian society. Including experts in disciplines such as history, education, aboriginal affairs, health, immigration, musical, literary and visual arts and sport could help restore the balance towards recognition of the many achievements in Australian society. Expansion of the Committee should be considered, or other mechanisms that allow input from a range of disciplines. Members of the Committee should have a broad and inclusive view of Australian society, and be mindful of the role of memorials in shaping the future Australia as well as commemorating the past.

The appropriate level of public participation in the development of proposed National Memorials

Public participation is an essential part of the development of Australia's memorials if they are to reflect our identity and the values we aspire to as a nation. Such things cannot be imposed by governments or by self-appointed interest groups who develop a memorial proposal, but must be subject to scrutiny by the wider community.

Public participation is particularly important in the light of a rift in recent years between Australian governments and civil society on the matter of the role of warfare in our national life. Governments have been far more ready for Australia to go to war than has civil society. For example, Australia's participation in the initiation of war against Iraq in 2003 was the subject of unprecedented opposition by large sections of the Australian community, even before the war began. Our role in the war in Afghanistan has been contentious since the war began, and it is increasingly unpopular.

Under these circumstances it would not be surprising if governments sought to elevate the role of warfare as a part of our identity, to help legitimise unpopular decisions. Some examples which tend to support this trend include the following:

- There has been greatly increased official emphasis, and funding, on instructing Australian schoolchildren in our military history, through incorporation into school curriculums, visits to commemorative sites, etc. Again it should be noted that MAPW is not arguing against all such instruction, but against the strong emphasis it currently attracts compared to other achievements of our nation.
- ANZAC Day 2015 has long since been designated as a major day of commemoration for our nation. However, there is no equivalent remembrance or celebration planned for any of the non-military events that have shaped our nation in a far more positive way than a failed military invasion.

In the light of these and other developments, it is even more important that mechanisms be implemented that ensure early, genuine and full participation of the public in the development of all future memorial proposals.

The process of public participation has been almost totally absent in the progression of the current proposal for new world war memorials to its near-final stages of approval. The proposal has been developed and promoted in secrecy. While its proponents have frequently promised public consultation, such consultation has not occurred. Transparency has been almost zero. One wonders how such behind-closed doors decision-making would be regarded by those to whom the memorials would be dedicated.

As stated in the introduction, even the terms of reference of the current inquiry appear designed to exclude specific comment on this proposal. Given the outstanding show of public opposition to the proposal, this process has been anathema to good democratic process.

MAPW believes that war memorials that are clearly unwanted do not serve to honour our war dead, and they are therefore illegitimate. Decisions taken thus far that have allowed the proposal for new memorials to the world wars to proceed should be rescinded.

The appropriate level of parliamentary oversight for proposed National Memorials

As stated above, memorials are an important and permanent statement of our values as a nation, and they therefore warrant the scrutiny and transparency of parliament. Parliamentary approval should be required for all new national memorials.