



16 July 2008

Mr Russell Chafer  
Secretary  
Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Chafer,

I am responding on behalf of Museums Australia to your letter dated 5 June 2008, inviting written submissions to the Public Accounts and Audit Committee of the Australian Parliament's Inquiry into the impact of the 'efficiency dividend' on small public sector agencies.

Please find below Museums Australia's response, in the form of a position statement outline. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to present some perspectives on behalf of Australia's museums and galleries to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bernice L. Murphy".

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(statement follows)

# MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO EFFICIENCY DIVIDEND

(Public Accounts and Audit Committee of the Australian Parliament: Inquiry into the impact of the “efficiency dividend” on small public sector agencies)

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## 1 BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Museums Australia’s organisational framework

Museums Australia (MA) is the peak body representing the wide range of museums and public galleries that operate across Australia (the museums sector).

Incorporating 54 sub-divisions, Museums Australia regularly interfaces with both individuals and institutions (on a more-or-less 55%-45% ratio basis) in the ongoing work of this national body. Almost 30 national networks, based around museum disciplines and functions such as history, art and design, information technology, education, marketing and ‘front of house’ activities, carry forward the many professional strands that make up this sector’s work in support of Australian identity and heritage.

The largest National and State institutions are members of Museums Australia, and Museums Australia itself interconnects – through its networks and programs – both individual museum and gallery practitioners and organisations across the country. Through the often rural and remote nature of Australia’s vastly dispersed communities, and the diverse panorama of Australia’s regions, we also encompass many small institutions run entirely by volunteers.

### 1.2 The scope and role of Museums Australia’s programs and activities – shared connections with the outreach focus of our *national museums*

Museums Australia and its state and regional branches offer many developmental programs on a regular annual, one-off and/or across-the-year basis.

The most ambitious Museums Australia activity annually is the National Conference. In recent years, it has been supported with a tied grant from the former DCITA to develop and manage highly successful Rural and Remote Programs of workshop training and museum-related activities. These are held in direct association with the National Conference event (realised through a rotation of host-cities including regional capitals).

Our *national museums and cultural institutions* are particularly conscious of the value of these Rural and Remote programs linking widely-scattered communities, and have directly supported them in various ways.

Broadly speaking, the ongoing activities undertaken by the museums sector nationally play an important part in promoting social capital and consolidating well-being in our distributed communities nation-wide. They help to build the cumulative identity by which Australians recognise themselves as interconnected and mutually enriched in this huge country, and through which Australia communicates its achievements and character as a nation to the wider world.

## **2 ISSUES**

### **2.1 The impact of our national institutions: a professional perspective**

I come now to the federal Government's efficiency dividend and its impact on important agencies such as the National Museum, Gallery, Library, Archives and related institutions in Canberra. (I include of course the Australian National Maritime Museum in my remarks, even though that institution is based in Sydney.)

Since coming to Canberra some five years ago, and as someone who has worked in and/or with our major museums in three states (Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales) for most of my professional life, I have been immensely struck by the importance, positioning and broad geographical outreach of our national cultural institutions.

These national institutions and museums in Canberra have a highly distinctive character that is recognisably different from the major capital city institutions. The state institutions in our capitals are deservedly distinguished in their own right, and some are outstanding national leaders in particular fields. However they have been shaped by different histories and governance under state/territory-based legislation, and are focussed accordingly on their own states, capital cities and regions as front lines in their service charter.

### **2.2 The social capital investment of the national institutions**

In comparison with the remit of their state and local colleagues, the role of the national institutions is to develop programs that seek to reach out in all directions simultaneously, and to all Australians, no matter how far-distant from the national capital they may be. It is the outward-directed institutional orientation, the orbital communication drive, access provision and services delivery by the national institutions that play a hugely important role – often quiet and insufficiently championed – in support of a *shared national identity*.

The national institutions, severally and together, operate as very significant agencies that promote and enhance social capital. In subtle ways their outreach programs help to cement common bonds of experience among people who live thousands of kilometres apart, from Pacific to Indian Ocean coastlines. They help to link communities from Broome to Burnie, from Albany to Cape York. They stimulate the forging of 'national' narratives woven from local stories, promoting a 'shared culture' and 'shared history' to be nurtured by and for all Australians.

In their affirmative access programs, the national institutions daily welcome visitors from all over the nation as social participants or on-line inquirers. Internally, they regularly compare the experiences gained by their staffs: of interaction with individuals, bodies and institutions from dispersed parts of the country – and indeed across the world. These institutions are required, by their various Acts of Parliament, to be more knowledgeable about more of Australia, cumulatively speaking, than their major peer institutions in the state capitals.

### **2.3 Cumulative impact of the Commonwealth 'efficiency dividend'**

The federal government's efficiency dividend of recent years has steadily tightened the resources of these national institutions. This has limited the number and constrained the extent of programs that they can offer to their various audiences such as tourists, researchers, educators, international visitors and in particular, far-flung citizens young and old. These diverse audiences are engaged in learning about and interpreting Australia's history, cultural, scientific and social achievements: in short, directly participating in the evolution of Australia's shared heritage and identity.

The increased efficiency dividend of 2007-2008 has exacted an even more severe re-adjustment of priorities by these institutions. It has in many respects (that the institutions themselves can identify internally) curbed their ability to maintain crucial functions and programs such as Travelling Exhibitions. It has caused cut-backs in some vital activities, and in other respects savaged initiatives they need to take to maintain their high level of performance in the competitive environment of today.

### **CONCLUSION**

The effects of continuing efficiency dividends by the Commonwealth government (now successively imposed for some years) are often imperceptible to the broad public of Australia. However they seriously impact on the ability of our key national institutions to maintain their high-value delivery to Australia's distributed national communities, to the nation as a whole, and their upholding of a respected position culturally for Australia in the wider world.

The impact on individual national institutions will doubtless be communicated to the Inquiry by the bodies concerned. Suffice it to say that this submission urges the Inquiry to consider the impact that the efficiency dividend is having on these 'small public sector agencies' who are in reality flagship institutions of a nation-wide museums sector that services 31 million visitors annually.\*

\*ABS Service Industry Survey statistics, 2007 media release.

Bernice Murphy  
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(18/7/2008)