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**Inquiry into the Administration of the *National Memorials Ordinance*
1928**

Submission by Australian Historical Association

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak body of academic historians in Australia, with members from a wide range of universities and other cultural and educational institutions, from all states and working at all levels of the discipline. It currently has around 600 members, a national executive of twelve members and is supported by an Executive Officer. The AHA publishes the scholarly journal *History Australia*, it organizes the annual conference, whose location alternates between metropolitan and regional centres (in Launceston in 2011, in Adelaide in 2012) and it administers a number of prestigious prizes – the Daniels, Hancock, Magarey, Martin and Serle awards - that recognise outstanding achievement in the writing of history.

The AHA welcomes this very timely enquiry into the administration of the National Memorials Ordinance of 1928. Believing that decisions concerning the character, construction and location of national memorials and monuments are of crucial importance in communicating knowledge of our past both to Australian citizens and overseas visitors and in defining our identity as

a nation, the AHA considers that the proper administration of the Ordinance and the Canberra National Memorials Committee (CNMC) created under the terms of the Ordinance is of the utmost national importance.

The AHA has in recent times been particularly concerned about the procedures governing the meetings and decision-making processes of the CNMC, in particular with regard to the approval of a proposal from a private company, calling itself the 'Memorials Development Committee', to build two new, very imposing 20 metre high war memorials on designated 'national land' on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin. It would seem from the Minutes and records of the National Capital Authority (NCA) and CNMC that although the 'location' of the proposed new war memorials was discussed and approved, as required of the CNMC under the Ordinance, their precise 'character' and the issue of duplication was not.

Whether the duplication involved in this proposal – the Australian War Memorial was itself conceived by CEW Bean and explicitly designed as a memorial to those who served in World Wars 1 and 2 - was known by the three members of the CNMC who decided the issue is not clear. The *Guidelines for Commemorative Works in the National Capital* explicitly state that: 'A commemorative proposal must not duplicate the themes or subject matter of an existing commemorative site'.

With a representative of the NCA comprising one of just three members of the CNMC who approved the proposal (that had been endorsed by the NCA in 2005), we are concerned about the apparent conflict of interest in the approval process and the lack of input from experts in national heritage and history and from people conversant with the *Guidelines*. We are concerned, too, about the increasing conflation of 'national memorials' with 'war memorials' suggested by the inclusion of the Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) on the CNMC since 2008. DVA provided \$250,000 as the prize for the winning entry in the design competition for the proposed new war memorials. It thus presumably has an investment in seeing this proposal through to construction.

More generally, the AHA is concerned about the omission of qualified historians from the process of assessing this and other proposed national memorials. We note that the original National Memorials Ordinance of 1928 stipulated that as well as parliamentary leaders from both sides of politics, CNMC membership should include two persons 'recognized as authorities on Australian history' who could provide expert advice on the 'Location and Character of National Memorials', as required of the Committee under the terms of the Ordinance. Early Committee members included Professor Ernest Scott of the University of Melbourne.

In 1953 an amendment to the Ordinance saw the historians dropped in favour of two persons 'resident in the Australian Capital Territory' plus one Ministerial appointee. Currently, in addition to the politicians and public servants required to sit on the Committee, there is but one other member serving on the Committee and that is the Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This suggests that a very narrow conception of the character of national memorials currently prevails on the CNMC. A return to the 1928 requirement that the membership include two persons 'recognized as authorities on Australian history' would, we submit, provide a broader and more informed perspective on the subject of national memorials.

The AHA wishes to remind the Committee of Inquiry that the *Guidelines* issued by the National Capital Authority regarding *Commemorative Works in our National Capital* stress the importance of recognising 'the plurality of the Australian historical and cultural experience'. The Evaluation Criteria recommend that proposals for memorials reflect 'the evolving values, ideas and aspirations of the Australian community' and that they have 'aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations of Australians'. The AHA recommends, accordingly, that National Memorials approved for construction on 'National Land' represent the full range of our civic, cultural, social and political history of achievement including, for example, our pioneering role as an advanced democracy, in introducing manhood and womanhood suffrage, minimum wages and the 8 hour day, a

system of judicial arbitration, old age, invalid and maternity pensions. An increasingly narrow concentration on our past military experience does not, we submit, do justice to 'the plurality of the Australian historical and cultural experience'.

Recommendations

1. The AHA recommends that in order to access appropriate historical expertise, the designated membership of the CNMC return to the initial requirement of the 1928 Ordinance, that 'persons recognized as authorities on Australian history' be appointed to the Committee.
2. The AHA recommends that the Minister request the AHA, as the peak body of historians in Australia, to submit names of such persons, who could serve on the CNMC.
3. The AHA recommends that the Committee of Inquiry consider ways in which proposals for National Memorials that represent the plurality of Australian historical experience might be better supported in a competitive, democratic and open manner, with, for example, seed funding provided to aid the development of proposals that commemorate all aspects of our historical experience, that reflect the ethnic diversity of our population and the distinctive achievements of women as well as men.

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