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MEDICAL ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION OF WAR

**SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AUSTRALIAN  
WAR MEMORIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

17 JULY 2020

**THE PROJECT'S STATED PURPOSES**

In addressing the stated purposes of the proposed work, the suitability of the proposed work for those purposes and the need for the work, MAPW will address the seven objectives set out by the Australian War Memorial for the proposal.

**a. Maintain the Memorial's national significance.**

The AWM correctly states in its submission that the Memorial is "*widely regarded as one of the most significant memorials of its type in the world.*" This status is jeopardised by the proposed grandiose expansion and disproportionate focus on the machinery of warfare at the expense of commemorating our war dead.

Significance is not proportional to size. Indeed, the redevelopment proposal undermines Charles Bean's founding concept that the AWM "*not be colossal in scale but rather a gem of its kind.*"

To maintain the national and international significance of the Memorial, it should be protected from the proposed semi-demolition and rebuild.

**b. Remediate existing constraints**

Any constraints that exist at the Memorial could be remedied in a far less expensive and destructive fashion than that outlined in the current proposal. The Memorial has acquired (for a fraction of the proposed \$498 million expenditure) a second campus at Mitchell in the ACT, which is estimated to be able to exhibit our "large technology objects" (LTOs - tanks, aircraft etc.) for the next 100 years.

The former director of the AWM Dr Brendan Nelson made a choice to underuse these facilities. His decision was out of step with similar situations elsewhere; for example the UK's Imperial War Museum has five campuses, including Duxford, which is devoted to such large items.

**c. Enhance gallery spaces**

According to material available thus far, including the AWM's promotional video for this project, the enhanced spaces are planned significantly for LTOs. However the respect for

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our war dead is not in proportion to how big a military museum we have. On the contrary, a strong focus on the machines that enable us to fight distracts from other important elements in the Memorial which currently receive inadequate attention, particularly “the events leading up to, and the aftermath of, wars and warlike operations” as defined in the AWM Act (see below).

It is a duty of the directors of our national institutions to choose which of the many available items can be displayed at any one time. Standard practice is to have only a very small percentage of items on display at any time. The AWM is no different in this respect.

**d. Improve the visitor experience**

Much criticism of the direction of the AWM in recent years has centred on its increasing tendency towards the entertainment of visitors, with many commentators noting with alarm its “theme park” and “Disneyland” style of sound and light and other experiences. For many visitors these are the antithesis of reflection and solemn commemoration. Unfortunately the proposed redevelopment appears intended to enhance the “entertainment” value for visitors. Its promotional video focuses on grandiose architecture and objects of technological fascination.

The goal of enhancing the visitor experience easily becomes conflated with a goal of boosting tourist dollars for the nation’s capital. The AWM’s own submission notes that it is “*one of Australia’s leading major tourist attractions*”. While it is true, and very appropriate, that many people visit the Memorial, to see such visits in terms of tourist potential (and dollars) adds an element of profiteering to human suffering and sacrifice.

The AWM Act does not mention the provision of a visitor experience or the attraction of tourists as a purpose of the Memorial.

**e. Improve the connection between the Australian War Memorial and community memorials**

This objective would duplicate the Memorial’s own “Places of Pride: National Register of War Memorials” and is completely unnecessary.

**f. Create information and reflective spaces for service men and women and their families**

While care of our service men and women is extremely important, and a duty on us as a nation, the goal could be achieved with vastly different expenditures and priorities from the current proposal.

Former AWM Director Dr Nelson made much of an alleged capacity of an expanded Memorial to “heal” veterans, particularly those suffering PTSD. However the healing of veterans is not one of the purposes of a war memorial. The triggering of vivid traumatic

memories is likely to be unhelpful rather than helpful in the treatment of PTSD. To justify the expansion of the Memorial on therapeutic grounds is a further betrayal of veterans who are not receiving adequate clinical therapy, and of family survivors of veteran suicide.

**g. Protect and showcase the National Collection**

Our National Collection must indeed be protected. As noted above however this does not mean that every available item must be showcased; directors must make choices. The AWM's Mitchell annex provides ample purpose-built space for the protection and showcasing of "large technology objects".

## **FURTHER COMMENTS**

### **Meeting obligations in the Australian War Memorial Act 1980**

The Australian War Memorial states in its submission to the Committee that the proposed works will enable the Memorial to meet its obligations to Government and the Australian people as detailed in the Australian War Memorial Act 1980.

However none of the functions listed in the Act under "Section 5 – Functions of Memorial" would appear to require a \$498 million demolition and expansion for the AWM obligations to be fulfilled. On the contrary, MAPW believes that the proposed works would distract from the functions of the Memorial as stated in the Act, and dishonour our war dead.

The AWM's functions as defined in the Act include:

- To maintain and develop a national memorial of Australians who have died on or as a result of active service, or as a result of any war or warlike operations in which Australians have been on active service.
- To exhibit historical material relating to Australian military history. The latter is defined as the history of:
  - (a) wars and warlike operations in which Australians have been on active service, including the events leading up to, and the aftermath of, such wars and warlike operations; and
  - (b) the Defence force

The AWM encapsulates its mission as being *"to help Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of conflict and operations and its enduring impact on Australian society."*

Thus both the AWM Act and the institution's mission statement mandate a broad context for the commemoration of our war dead, which goes far beyond battlefield experiences. That context includes many questions which are currently ignored or marginalised at the Memorial, such as:

- The historical context of each of Australia's many wars, to help explain: How did this war begin? What might have prevented it? Which factors helped perpetuate it or stymie peace prospects?
- The divisions, and "democratic deficit", created in Australian society as a result of ill-judged decisions for war, such as our participation in the Vietnam War and the illegal and disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.
- The impacts of Australia's wars on our security, including negative impacts from our involvement in the "war on terror" since 2001.
- The economic impacts of all of Australia's wars.
- Civilian experiences of war. Many Australians have suffered wars' horrors and deprivations as civilians, either in Australia or in other places before coming here. Most of the victims of modern wars are civilians, and yet representation of their experiences in the AWM is too often marginalised or sanitised.
- The environmental impacts of all of Australia's wars.
- Critical questions such as why wars persist, and what have we learnt.

In contrast to these questions, the proposed major works appear strongly focussed on the narrow field of how our war dead died. It is proposed that "pride of place" will be given to decommissioned military hardware, including even an F-111 aircraft which has been used by the ADF only for a reconnaissance flight. Such emphasis shifts the focus from people - our war dead - to machines.

The sheer scale of the proposed works is grand militarisation writ large, with visitors walking amidst the machinery of warfare, an experience clearly intended to inspire awe and fascination at the technology itself.

### **Avoiding propaganda**

A further deeply troubling aspect of the proposal is the planned live feed of current ADF operations in wars that have not yet finished. Clearly, material that is critical of current operations or portrays them in a negative way would not be exhibited. This would have the effect of placing such wars beyond the reach of criticism or dissent, thus undermining a crucial part of our democracy.

The questions that arise include whether operations that deeply divide our nation, for example the use of the ADF in Operation Sovereign Borders to turn back desperate people seeking asylum, would be displayed, or only more widely accepted operations. Either way, the risks for the

Memorial include becoming a politicised outlet for the Defence Department, complicity with military propaganda and being used as a tool for military recruitment.

### **Using our resources wisely**

Many people have raised the issue of the “opportunity cost” of the proposed expenditure of \$498 million (or whatever the final cost will eventually be). This sum could provide huge benefits if directed to any of the following:

- Commemoration of Australia’s Frontier Wars (see below)
- A peace museum to promote the cause of peace – the goal for which Australians are said to fight
- Veterans’ welfare
- Canberra’s other important cultural institutions that are struggling financially.
- Helping the millions of Australians in need, particularly at this time of back-to-back disasters.

### **Commemorating *all* our wars**

A proposed huge redevelopment of the AWM that continues to pay marginal attention to the Frontier Wars, the conflicts that have had a profound and lasting impact on the descendants of this land’s original inhabitants, simply magnifies the deep stain of colonial dispossession on our national story. The Frontier Wars were recognised as “war” as they occurred. The arguments that they were simply skirmishes between settlers and original inhabitants, or that they don’t belong in our national war memorial, are unsustainable.

The Memorial’s special recognition of Aboriginal men who fought overseas “for king and country” in 20<sup>th</sup> century wars is irrelevant. It is the violent dispossession of *this* land that must finally be given due focus and commemoration in our national war memorial.

### **Consulting, listening and due process**

Final comment should be made on the matter of public opposition to this project, which has been extremely strong, and the AWM’s misrepresentation of public opinion.

On 29 June 2019, a Canberra Times poll asked readers “Do you support the call by former War Memorial director Brendon Kelson that the proposed \$500 million expansion should be dropped?” 80% of respondents said “Yes”. The weight of other comment publicly expressed on the proposal supports that result.

By contrast, on 4 March, Wayne Hitches, Executive Program Director of the redevelopment project, made the extraordinary claim to Senate Estimates that four out of five Australians support the redevelopment. The AWM has failed, when requested, to provide for MAPW the evidence on which Mr Hitches’ claim was made. The AWM has also failed to provide, when requested by

MAPW, its report on the latest round of “public consultations”, which were completed months ago. MAPW’s account of that process can be found [here](#).

That a project that is so significant and yet so monumentally unpopular should have forged ahead, oblivious to public opinion, is a travesty of the democratic values for which Australians have fought. This episode marks a very low point in Australia’s war commemoration.

Further lack of due process, or at the very least departure from usual process, is evident in the fact that the Public Works Committee is being asked to decide on this project before the required EPBC heritage assessment has been made. One would have thought that heritage information would be important in the Committee’s assessment of the proposal.