

SUBMISSION OF THE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION OF WAR (AUSTRALIA)

To the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories inquiry into Canberra's national institutions

9 May, 2018

The Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia), MAPW, appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the JSCNCET inquiry into Canberra's national institutions.

A summary and list of recommendations from this submission appear at the end.

INTRODUCTION

MAPW is an organisation dedicated to a reduction of armed conflict and its multiple impacts on people and the environment. We recognise the importance of national institutions in the formation of public opinion, including on matters of war and peace. The choice of institutions that a country decides upon, the messages they convey and the degree of prominence they are given in national life will influence individual opinions on issues of the day such as warfare.

This submission relates to the Australian War Memorial (AWM). We note that this inquiry's purpose is to report on strategies that Canberra's national institutions are using to "maintain viability and relevance to sustainably grow their profile, visitor numbers, and revenue". Of the specific terms of reference, the submission will address the following:

2. experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation;
4. cultivating private sector support;
5. developing other income streams;

2. New forms of public engagement and audience participation

The AWM website [states](#) that the Memorial's purpose is to "*commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war*". In addition, its mission is to "*assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society*".

The profile and extent of public engagement of the AWM has risen in recent years, especially during the period of the World War 1 centenary commemoration. Under the directorship of Dr Brendan Nelson, the AWM has been promoted almost as a religious shrine, where "*the soul of the nation resides*". Huge resources have been expended on audio-visual and other measures that appear directed to the purpose of attracting an audience. However the success of this process in terms of public engagement does not necessarily translate to a real understanding of Australia's history of going to war. Rather it runs the risk of blurring the distinction between commemoration and understanding on the one hand, and entertainment on the other. Entertainment is not a part of the purpose or mission of the AWM.

Of particular concern are the efforts to make the visits of Australian children to the AWM an enjoyable, even exciting, experience. While [activities such as](#) dressing up as a nurse, or climbing aboard an Iriquois helicopter, or playing in a make-believe WW1 trench in the suburbs of Canberra, might be fun, whether or not these activities give any hint to our young people of the realities of warfare - for example the stench of dead bodies, the incessant noise of shells overhead, the screams of those mutilated or being buried alive in mud, the hunger, and the grieving - is another matter. Many would argue that we do our young, and our nation, a great disservice in presenting a version of history that is sanitised beyond recognition. Such distortions come close to being propaganda designed to prepare yet another generation for being the next victims of endless warfare.

The trend towards audience engagement in the excitement of warfare appears set to take yet a further mighty leap, this time with expenditure estimated to be \$1/2 billion, with recently announced plans for a huge expansion of the AWM underground to enable further displays of military hardware.

The plans are reported to include a display of Defence Department material on current operations. This would be grossly inappropriate; whether or not it is designed to discourage questioning and stifle any dissent on Australia's current wars, it would certainly tend to have that effect on an audience targeted with selected favorable images.

The proposal to display current ADF operations is rendered all the more offensive by the possibility of including Australia's turning around of refugee boats. Australia's refugee policy - by which refugees from the very wars we help initiate are often refused entry here - is probably the most politicised and divisive of all issues in Australia in recent years. It has brought Australia into disrepute internationally. Proponents who regard the AWM as a suitable place to display Australia's rejection of boatloads of desperate people have simply lost the plot.

As the AWM heads towards being a showcase for the wars and other military actions of the day, there is a very disturbing sense of militarism that directly undermines any real understanding of the meaning of war for Australians.

Perhaps the most important observation of Australia's commemoration of warfare, which is exemplified by the AWM, is that of historian Henry Reynolds. In his book *"Unnecessary Wars"* Reynolds wrote (page 209) that our commemoration is focused on *"how they fought, not why they fought."* An examination of the latter is arguably far more important to fulfilling our obligations to our war dead than simply reciting the mechanics of the battles in which Australians have fought.

Unfortunately the AWM does very little to advance this - to educate Australians about the causes of the wars in which we have been involved, the history of the efforts that have been made to prevent them, and the lessons for the future. The AWM's mission - *"to assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society"* - cannot be fulfilled without examining the broader contexts in which we fight our wars.

MAPW understands that the AWM has a large collection of peace movement materials - including notices, posters, articles and other items, for example from the Vietnam War period and from the anti-conscription movement of World War 1 - and yet very little of this has ever been on public display. While we accept that there is not space to display all available material, the current

emphasis seems to be heavily skewed towards military items rather than a broader selection of items depicting war's impacts on Australia. This is inappropriate for an institution which is not a military museum but a war memorial.

One particularly interesting exhibition which could have become a more prominent and/or permanent display was the 'Reality in Flames' exhibition, a modern art movement response to World War 2 at the time.

There are two particular aspects of Australia's experience of warfare that receive grossly inadequate (if any) attention within the AWM. They are the impacts of the frontier wars against this country's first inhabitants, and the impacts on civilians of the wars in which we fight.

- ***The Frontier Wars***

The AWM has arbitrarily decided that fighting in defence of territory - that of Australia's original inhabitants - that took place on Australian soil from 1788 until well into the 20th century and led to tens of thousands of deaths, despite courageous resistance, should not be commemorated in the Memorial.

That the struggle of the Aboriginal people was regarded as warfare at the time should not be disputed. The Australian and British archives contain many references to the frontier conflict as "war".

The violent dispossession of the Aboriginal people is increasingly discussed and recognised in our society as having enduring impacts. This is manifest, for example, in the growing controversy over the date on which Australia Day should be celebrated. It is an issue that is not going away.

In the face of such a decision by the AWM to relegate the Frontier Wars to some form of non-warlike activity, of cultural interest but not in the same category as "real" wars, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the decision is highly politicised, and it is deemed better that, in this instance, Australians do not "*remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war*". Perhaps such an understanding in the case of the Frontier Wars might raise extremely uncomfortable questions about the implications for modern day Australia and our approach to warfare, or perhaps a focus on the Frontier Wars against the first people of Australia simply presents no scope for attracting lucrative corporate funding. Whatever the reasons, this most fundamental of all omissions in our pre-eminent place of war commemoration acts as a major hindrance in understanding the place of warfare in Australia's history.

In 2013, AWM Director Dr Brendan Nelson [explained](#) his fast-tracking process for the new exhibit on Afghanistan: "*We owe it to Australia to explain the narrative.*" Do we not owe it to Australia to explain the narrative of the wars that dispossessed our first peoples? Nelson also spoke passionately of a program to link schoolchildren to the names of World War 1 war dead, as a way of "*linking our past with our future*" and helping our children to understand the sacrifice of "*real men who had real lives*". Do we not owe it to Australia's first inhabitants to recognise the "*real men with real lives*" who died in the frontier wars? Is the past of the aboriginal people not worth linking with our future?

New galleries in the AWM to examine this hitherto hidden part of our history would be of enormous interest to very many Australians, and would be likely to do more to boost visitor numbers than displaying yet more of the killing machines that do little to further our understanding of warfare.

- **Civilians**

While the AWM addresses the impact of our wars on civilians back home, there is scant recognition of the fact that modern warfare is increasingly an assault on civilian society wherever the war happens to be fought. The current wars in the Middle East, in which Australia is taking part, are a stark example. Civilians form the majority of war's victims. Even a strict interpretation of the AWM's mission "*to assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war*" does not allow for such a stark omission. What of the experiences of those Australians who have lived as civilians in war zones elsewhere? What of the experiences of ADF personnel who suffer severe psychological harm related to the suffering, both civilian and combatant, that they have witnessed or perhaps have taken part in? Any impression that the wars in which Australia takes part are simply a matter of fighter versus fighter is false and misleading; it hinders any attempt to interpret and understand Australia's experience of war in its proper context.

Any real examination of the Australian experience of war should involve looking at how and why Australia has become involved in wars. It also must reflect on what we could have done to prevent the horrors of war being repeated on our armed forces and their families and communities on many occasions since World War 2.

4. Cultivating private sector support

The most controversial aspect of the AWM's cultivation of private sector support is in its choice of such supporters. Among the AWM's financial donors are several of the biggest names in weapons manufacturing globally, the very companies that profit financially from the horrors that we commemorate. They include Boeing Australia, Raytheon Australia, Lockheed Martin, Thales Australia, the Australian Submarine Corporation, General Dynamic Land Systems and others.

The problem goes further than the mere acceptance of donations from war profiteers, and even extends to the promotion of brand names. BAE Systems, the UK's biggest weapons maker, has its name proudly displayed as the sponsor of the AWM's theatre. BAE Systems is a major military supplier to Saudi Arabia, which is one of the world's most prolific sponsors of international terrorism, including the same forces of terrorism that the ADF is said to be combatting in the Middle East. The irony is stark. BAE warplanes are currently playing a central role in Saudi Arabia's attacks in Yemen, which are causing a [humanitarian catastrophe](#) there. To have BAE's name glorified alongside our war dead is contemptible.

Cultivation of corporate support - including from the war profiteers - includes also the provision of facilities for corporate functions with all the trappings designed to impress. AWM promotion of the facilities [boasts](#) of the "*unique dining experience where you can wine and dine among historic*

items...” and capacity for “*gala dinners*” and “*cocktail functions*”. One can only guess what the diggers in their rat-infested trenches might have thought about sharing commemorative space with the industry that profited from their slaughter. For those of us who are still alive, few things could be more offensive.

5. Developing other income streams

While this submission does not address the issue of income streams for the AWM beyond urging that weapons’ company funding be ceased, one other observation will be made.

Australia has spent far more on World War 1 commemoration than any other nation, including all those which suffered vastly bigger losses than Australia. Therefore, one could reasonably argue for a more modest and affordable style and level of commemoration. The planned expansion costing \$1/2 billion is not the marker of an institution struggling to maintain its presence. Reversal of the decision to expand would obviate the need for developing other sources of income, and would be more in keeping with the simple but deeply meaningful forms of commemoration that proliferated in towns throughout the country after World War 1.

Other relevant matters the Committee wishes to examine, including the process for establishing new institutions

Redirection of some funding to the prevention of armed conflicts, and to peace education, would go a long way to building the better world that Australians have died for. The creation of a Peace Museum would be an extraordinarily valuable addition to our list of national institutions, to showcase the steps that help to promote peace and Australia’s history of contributing to these steps. Such education for our young people would help balance the material presented at the AWM.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. The AWM is not in the same category as other “tourist attractions”; its purpose is not entertainment or revenue-raising. Any approach to its public engagement should be seen in this light.**
- 2. The AWM’s current activities to engage children by entertaining them have the effect of distorting any understanding of the real nature of warfare. They are inappropriate and should be withdrawn. War should not be presented as a fun activity.**
- 3. The AWM would increase its relevance to all Australians, including those descended from the first Australians, by inclusion of the Frontier Wars, the one set of conflicts in our history that are currently specifically excluded from its galleries.**

4. The AWM would also increase its relevance to all Australians, especially those civilians who have lived in war zones, by a greater focus on wars' impacts on civilians (and not only civilians back home in Australia).
5. An additional means to attract new audiences, and present a more balanced picture of Australia in times of war, would be to display a far greater collection of peace movement activities that have been conducted in relation to Australia's wars.
6. Weapons company funding of AWM programs and facilities represents a highly offensive conflict of interest. It should cease.
7. The AWM would not need a huge and ever-growing budget if it were to adopt a more modest style of commemoration, in keeping with a national sense of grieving for our war dead and all that they endured. The current trend towards bigger and better displays on how we fight is looking increasingly grandiose and militaristic, and represents a dangerous trend.
8. The creation of a Peace Museum would add greatly to Australians' understanding of ways in which wars can be prevented and Australia's past contributions to this process. As a step towards creating a more positive future for all Australians, and honouring our debt to those who fought in "the war to end all wars", it deserves serious attention at the highest levels.