

what's at stake?

*History Wars, the NMA and
Good Government.*

JULIE MARCUS

I want to place the fate of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in the context of some of the political strategies that underpin the electoral placidity and public acceptance of a government so radically reshaping Australian democratic institutions. A national museum that reaches and engages with a national constituency can be an important place for the vigorous public debate that democracy requires. In such a place, political doctrines and dogmas, cultural fantasies and assumptions, historical interpretations and good old common-sense may all be scrutinised as well as confirmed. Such a place sits beside schools and universities, public libraries and art galleries and festivals, each of which provides the opportunity for reflection as well as for congratulation. It is the pause for that moment of reflection that is at stake in the *Review of the National Museum of Australia, its Exhibitions and Public Programs*.¹ For, as with the other publicly funded but independent sites of public reflection, the National Museum is to be reined in and redirected. It is to become 'balanced'. Nothing could more surely ring its death knell. In future, the museum's visitors will reflect along the narrow and limited lines of carefully delineated 'alternatives' that in fact confine and constrain rather than enlarge understanding. And visitors will certainly not be reflecting upon the political dogmas of the day.

Shortly, Dawn Casey will be replaced as director of the National Museum. The director of the War Memorial Museum, who contributed a submission to the review, and Philip Jones, Senior Curator of the South Australian Museum and member of the panel that produced the review, have both been reported as possible replacements. Whoever is chosen, that person is likely to be someone with a clear track record of support for the radically conservative values of the present government, a person who will help to bring yet another formerly

autonomous but publicly funded organisation firmly under government control. The inauguration of the regime of control is already under way. The appointment of two further conservatives to the museum's governing council—nationalist historian John Hirst and John Fleming, an ordained Catholic priest, broadcaster and conservative ethicist—will shift substantially the political colour and responsibilities of the museum.² With these appointments the independence of the National Museum will be guaranteed only in so far as its work conforms to Prime Minister John Howard's view of the truth of Australian history. In the words of Gerard Henderson, despite the Howard government's relatively limited successes in the cultural wars: 'Forget about Australian participation in any second Gulf war ... There is more conflict on the home front right now as the intensity of what has been called "the culture wars" increases. The National Museum of Australia is the immediate battleground.'³

I am not sure whether 'culture wars' is the best term to describe what is happening but it certainly lends an urgency to what might otherwise be seen as matters less than central to the politics of the day. Why should the conflict be so fierce? What on earth is at stake? The key to these questions is to be found in two aspects of the present government's political agenda. The first is the strong antipathy of the Howard government to the critics of its policies, people he lambastes as the 'elites'. From its earliest days, the government moved to disenfranchise, defund and take control of its homelands. The assault on the NMA is simply one front in this much broader battle to eradicate dissent and impose compliance. The defunding of the universities is another. And second, there is a very personal connection between the Prime Minister and the museum. In funding it he hoped to develop a cultural institution devoted to displaying a key element of his leadership and electoral success—his new and successful version of 'the Australian story'.⁴

On the face of it, the NMA came through its review pretty well. There were some technical matters (the lighting is often very poor, labels need to improve and some of the displays are too crowded) but these are trivial. There were also comments about building better links with other institutions and bolstering research, matters requiring funding that has not yet been provided; and there was a series of suggestions about displays that might be included that were slightly off the mark, given that much of what was missing is currently found in other competing museums. Much of the commentary seemed superficial at best, platitudinous or vapid at worst but not particularly threatening. And the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia seemed to come through largely unscathed. Bain Attwood, however, made the immediate point that while Aboriginal culture seemed to have survived, Aboriginal history would be another matter.⁵

Early public commentary on the review focused on its positive statements about the ways in which the museum had met its responsibilities under its enabling legislation, the favourable comment on some of the exhibitions (for example, that titled *Eternity*) and the relatively

positive response to the Aboriginal gallery. Much was also made of a disclaimer from Philip Jones in which he disagreed with his colleagues that tighter definitions were required in the 'Nation' and 'Horizons' displays. (26)

However, I fear that the early hope as to the relatively benign nature of the review is misplaced and based on a generous misunderstanding of the forces at play. I have already mentioned the changing political direction resulting from the loss of the present director and the two new appointments to the museum's council. John Hirst, for example, is known as a nationalist historian, a critic of multiculturalism and an early defender of the Australian pioneer legend against Russel Ward's critics.⁶ He has also published a conservative commentary on women's history writing in *Quadrant* and he was a critic of the Australian Bicentennial project that led to the publication of a 'people's history'.⁷ It seems unlikely that he will promote the more inclusive values of the disciplines of history and cultural studies that are so important for a museum of contemporary relevance. I also believe that Attwood was right to fear that the new regime now being installed will introduce substantial changes to the Aboriginal exhibitions. It is at least possible that the review will have the style and aesthetics of the new Aboriginal gallery of the South Australian Museum in mind rather than that of a gallery aimed at challenging stereotypes of frontier conflict and at presenting Aboriginal understandings of history. And undoubtedly there will be a return to a history of Australia from the introduction of civilisation by Captain James Cook (the review was critical of his absence from the current displays) to the triumphalism of Howard through recycled nationalist fantasies that, at their heart, remain resolutely racialised, masculine, deeply sexist and homophobic.

Let's look first at the review's recommendations as to what the National Museum should be and do. The panel believes that if the NMA is to become an institution of international stature it must excel in the following areas:

1. telling the Australian story
2. presenting the primary themes and narratives of Australia since British arrival, including national character traits, exemplary individuals, group and institutional achievements and charting the qualities of the nation
3. presenting the history of indigenous peoples, their life and culture, their diversity
4. conveying the history of the land and how people interact with it (geology, biology etc)
5. conveying the mosaic of everyday lives, diversity, migrants
6. including darker historical moments 'with truthfulness, sobriety and balance'
7. building an outstanding collection based on research
8. collaborating with other museums
9. providing national access to relevant public and schools programs⁸.

These were the criteria addressed by the review, the criteria that directed the investigation. In addressing each area the reviewers gave the museum a relatively positive report before turning to their criticisms: '[T]he Museum's principal weakness is its story-telling—the NMA is short on compelling narratives ... And there are too few focal objects, radiant and numinous enough to generate memorable vignettes, or to be drawn into fundamental moments.' (68) The review points to problems in translating narrative into museum practice that have led to incoherence and thus to bewilderment for the museum visitor. It judged the paucity of narrative and absence of the numinous object to be the two crucial failings of the NMA. These were also the conclusions that the chair of the review, John Carroll, stressed in his media appearances on its release. The majority of these conclusions follow from this diagnosis. All else is justification, window-dressing and elaboration of this central critique. It forms the reviewers' explanation of why the exhibits, in their view, fail to engage visitors. In particular, they say that the Horizons gallery suffers from these defects and, in addition, suffers from an absence of exemplary individuals and achievements. The gallery devoted to the period from Federation in 1901, the choice of themes and their execution are also, according to the review, problematic.

But why should a relatively restrained review lead to the replacement of the museum's director, Dawn Casey, and to the addition of two very conservative individuals to the museum's already interventionist council? In my view, the review is actually concerned not with inadequate narrative but with 'incorrect' narrative. The museum is not telling the real, correct or proper story. It fails to tell the Prime Minister's 'Australian story'. As a result, the museum has become not simply the site of the 'culture' or 'history' wars, but the focus of prime ministerial anxiety about *his* Australian story.

— THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

Perhaps on being elected in 1996, Prime Minister John Howard wanted a place in which the *real* Australian story could be told, the story that would repeal those histories he saw as painting Australia 'as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism'.⁹ These were the histories stigmatised by Geoffrey Blainey as 'black armband' history, a term analogous to the 'misery concept' history used in the former German Democratic Republic to criticise German historians offering a self-critical reading of the causes and nature of the Third Reich.¹⁰ It was John Howard rather than his supposedly culturally sensitive predecessor, Paul Keating, who finally funded the building of the NMA. After thirteen years in the political wilderness Howard wanted a national museum that would tell *his* story of Australia, the positive story of pioneers, explorers, Gallipoli, our Don Bradman, mateship and larrikinism; the story that people could feel relaxed and comfortable with; the story that had been challenged for at least two decades by academic historians, feminists and all the

other forces aligned to the cultural moment that was defeated so soundly in the election of 1996. To see his project through, Howard placed his closest and most trusted servants on the museum's governing council. Tony Staley, former Liberal Party politician and now president of the Liberal Party, was appointed to chair the council; David Barnett, journalist and John Howard's biographer, and Christopher Pearson, sometime speech writer for Howard with a track record of opposing reform of gay marriage rights and Tasmania's homosexual laws, and of discrediting women's claims to religious authority in the Hindmarsh Island bridge case.¹¹ Howard's government provided a handsome A\$150 million for building the museum on a lakeside site in Canberra.¹²

Yet somehow, the museum kept slipping away from Howard's story of Australia and Howard's view of history. Not only were many historians resisting his vision and the new forms of racial and cultural assimilation proposed as his government's answer to the years of 'multiculturalism', but in 1997 the report into the removal of children from their Aboriginal families, *Bringing Them Home*, erupted onto the political landscape. In *Bringing Them Home* the impact of government policies on the Indigenous population was described as genocide.¹³ A massive counter-offensive followed. The government, commercial media, corporately funded think tanks, and conservative journals and societies systematically began the task of undoing and discrediting the report on the stolen generations. In this context Keith Windschuttle, sometime academic, journalist and swingeing critic of cultural studies in the universities, found a new project—the demolition of left-wing histories in general and the criticism of the National Museum exhibitions along the way.¹⁴ Denial of genocide lies at the heart of Windschuttle's criticisms of Australian historians and his attempts to deflate the Aboriginal death toll. His first high-profile foray into criticism of the National Museum came in a series of articles written for *Quadrant*, claiming, among other things, that the museum's display of the Bells Falls massacre was in fact commemorating nothing other than a fabrication. His claim triggered a conference on the history of frontier conflict in Australia, in which Windschuttle's arguments and his criticisms of Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds were discussed extensively.¹⁵

As the architectural design and exhibition plans developed, those members of the museum's council closest to the Prime Minister became increasingly interventionist and frustrated. An internal memorandum from David Barnett to Tony Staley, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 6 June 2001, gives an indication of the strains of those times:

Label 0829

The stolen children exhibit is a victim episode. Surely, if we are to involve ourselves in this controversy, there should be an attempt to explain what it was about: the children were half-castes, who were routinely murdered all the way from Hindmarsh Island to Broome,

the priority was their welfare, often they were given up for adoption, and they were not taken from mothers able to care for them. No court has yet upheld a stolen child case. There is no balance here ...

Label 0826-70

Heather Rose. Another unfortunate. The way to get a place in the museum is to have something terrible befall you ...¹⁶

And much later in the litany of complaints:

Is this what we mean by 'thought-provoking', 'challenging', 'controversial' and 'seeking to promote informed debate'.

If we are going to be balanced and thought provoking about the Harvester Judgement, and how what seemed like a good idea at the time turned out to be disastrous. What about H.R. Nicholls and Charles Copeman for the Hall Of Fame, along with Captain Moonlite and Mary McKillop. Copeman told his principals that if he were allowed to sort out restrictive trade practices at Robe River he would get a 10 per cent improvement in productivity, and got 70 percent. What about Chris Corrigan. And if we think death is so funny, why don't we have Ben Chifley as well as Harold Holt.

I would have thought a national Museum in the national capital might have managed interesting exhibits dealing with the founding fathers and telling us who past prime ministers have been and something about them without being egregious ...

Barnett's leaked memorandum also indicates his concern that the heroes of the present group of radical conservative activists were being omitted: H.R. Nicholls; Hugh Morgan, controversial anti-land rights activist and director of the Western Mining Corporation; Chris Corrigan, CEO of Patrick Corporation, which with important help from the Howard government set out to break the waterfront unions; and Charles Copeman of mining corporation Peko-Wallsend. Basically, Barnett's complaint was that the museum lacked balance and was therefore biased.

While an independent review by Graeme Davison found Barnett's claims of bias to be unsubstantiated, the memo gives an indication of the sort of Australian story Barnett wanted the museum to tell, the story that Judith Brett sees as central to Howard's appropriation of the Australian legend to the Liberal Party. Its significance should not be underestimated. Brett places this appropriation at the fulcrum of Howard's electoral success and Labor's continuing policy disarray.¹⁷ Later, Christopher Pearson would wrangle with Davison over whether the word 'challenge' was appropriate as an aim of the museum. Davison won that battle but the war, I fear, is lost.

All in all, I think it fair to say that although the Prime Minister's men approved the design of the building and its exhibitions, it has been the sustained hullabaloo around Indigenous issues emanating from right-wing think tanks combined with media confrontations around Keith Windschuttle's claims about mainstream Australian historians that provided the government with the trigger to commission a review of the NMA less than two years after the museum's opening.

— THE PANEL

I believe that *Review of the National Museum of Australia* was always intended as the first step in the process of getting the Australian story right. The panel chosen to carry out this important task was small and relatively inexperienced in the world of museums. Sociologist John Carroll was appointed to chair the review panel. Like his fellow appointee, corporate lawyer Richard Longes, Carroll appears to have little recorded experience in museum management or exhibition assessment although he has published on the need for archetypes and new national narratives in modern life.¹⁸ Even Gerard Henderson of the Sydney Institute regarded Carroll's appointment as unusual. In passing, he reports Tony Staley as discounting the notion that Carroll was there to make sure the government's view of history was installed. Tony Staley, Henderson wrote,

has described as 'tripe' claims that the intention of the Carroll review is to bring the museum exhibitions into line with the Howard government's view of history (*The Australian*, yesterday). And Carroll has declared that it was 'wrong' to depict him as 'conservative'. Rather, he declared, his views were best described as 'both culturally and politically eclectic' (*The Age*, December 30, 2002). They certainly are.

In view of the controversy surrounding the museum, one would have expected [Minister Rod] Kemp to have favoured a pragmatic type—either historian or curator—to head the review committee. But, instead, he favoured a sociologist—of eclectic disposition. Stand by for more (cultural) explosions in Australia's very own battle of ideas.

Carroll, a columnist in *The Australian Financial Review*, recently wrote on January 9 that 'since the last federal election the Howard Government has hardly put a foot wrong'. He has also alleged, without evidence, that Paul Keating attempted to 'turn Australia into an Asian nation' (*The Financial Review*, October 18, 2002). How could he do so, even if he wanted to?¹⁹

Carroll, however, had been an early supporter of the new forms of conservatism that have become so crucial to the present government's social agenda and which are reflected in the publications of the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). Museum expertise was provided by the director of the Monash Science Centre, palaeontologist Patricia Vickers-Rich and his-

torian Philip Jones from the South Australian Museum. Like Christopher Pearson, Philip Jones is known for his role in discrediting women's claims to religious knowledge relating to the controversial Hindmarsh bridge case in South Australia. Although Jones heads up the South Australian Museum's anthropology section, he is recognised not as anthropologist but as an historian. Despite the centrality of the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia to the National Museum's exhibitions, there was no recognised anthropologist appointed to the panel. Nor was there anyone with a track record either in the analysis of the visual aspects of exhibitions or in the theories of discourse, visual narrative and relations of power underpinning contemporary museology. Breadth to the review was provided by the process of receiving submissions (not yet made available) and a series of interviews with people whose names have been kept secret.

— THE REVIEW

Recall that the very first criterion of excellence against which the National Museum was to be judged was 'telling the Australian story'. It was this story that had to be remedied. In a very direct way, the report exhibits not simply the limitations of its contributors but also the conflicts arising from the need to reconcile the authors' public duty and acceptance of scholarly values with the need to provide some form of justification for the changes the government was seeking.

The weaknesses of the thinking informing the report are particularly evident in the chapter titled 'Reflections and Vision', which provides the justification for the criteria by which the museum would be judged. If this chapter is really intended to carry the weight placed upon it, a little more intellectual scaffolding would have been appropriate. The absence of any detailed consideration of the substantial literature concerning museums, their role and the meaning of 'national' in a museum context is very noticeable. While the report alludes to 'competing and sometimes incompatible views' it goes on to claim that: 'The main change in recent decades is towards a conception of a national museum as an institution that somehow projects a society's sense of itself, its major and defining traits. Its focus has increasingly become national identity.' (6) To substantiate their view the reviewers cite a paragraph from a doctoral thesis by James Gore of Rhodes University, South Africa: 'National museums find themselves in conflict ... yet, the national museum exists primarily to tell the story of a nation ... needs to retain some kind of coherent narrative, to show the nation's progress and to hold all the other stories together'. (6) His proposition, that a national museum is about national identity and as such requires a coherent narrative charting the nation's progress may be a comforting one but it hardly reflects the relevant current scholarship on national museums. It is, however, a claim that supports the provision of space for illustrating the story John Howard wants told: a new Australian legend.

However, the Howard government has always been wary of some kinds of ‘identity politics’, particularly pluralistic politics of gender, race or sexuality. Once the story of Australia becomes one of illustrating national identity the report turns to the central element of the museum narrative, the object and its display. The report attempts to link museum objects to the established requirement for narrative. As it stands, this section of the chapter is so full of contradictions that it makes little sense. To illustrate my point, I quote a paragraph in full:

A related issue is that of balancing grand narratives with diverse and more modest stories. It is stories that engage people. Museums of their essence work, at least partly, by displaying objects which are compelling in themselves—in their significance, their beauty, their antiquity—ones that can stand alone, like illuminated icons. Yet even here an accompanying or assumed narrative is usually necessary in order to make sense of the object—the Elgin marbles are confusing fragments without some awareness of classical Athens; or, exhibiting Judy Garland’s shoes from *The Wizard of Oz* depends on visitor knowledge of the film, and the Garland legend. It is extremely rare for an object to work on its own—perhaps the painted bust of Queen Nefertiti in Berlin is an instance, the object so stunningly beautiful as not to need interpretation, and the same might even be claimed for Phar Lap in Melbourne. (7)

Overall, I think the paragraph, as it stands, is attempting to establish both the need for narrative within the museum and the need to have some very special iconic objects in a collection or a display. The next paragraph continues to address the need for narrative by confusing narrative, interpretation and labelling. It also displays the same form of muddled expression that characterises this section of the report. The first sentence of the next paragraph, for example, reads, ‘Museum exhibits that do not work by means of an enchanting focal object are all the more dependent on generating engaging narratives’. (7) While this is clearly attempting to introduce the claim of an ‘overwhelming consensus among those consulted by the panel about the centrality of narrative as the necessary method of museum presentation’, it does not actually make sense. The problem lies with the word ‘generating’. Is the ordinary object generating narratives, in which case they would escape the need for labelling, or is the curator generating a narrative around the object that lacks iconic status?

The following paragraphs of the review discuss the risk that in presenting displays of diversity, an assembly of ill-coordinated fragments might emerge that would confuse the visitor. Fragments that are poorly coordinated might well confuse a visitor, but the larger claim made is the stronger one: that displays of diversity will indeed lead to confusion, no doubt due to the absence of narrative. There is no need, however, for fragments to be ill coordinated and if they are, no ‘narrative’ will rescue them.

One of the key alternatives offered by the report is a focus on ‘national traits’, traits that may well spring from the ground itself:

The land provides a cue for one of the national traits, that it is not characterised by single dramatic formations—those who go looking for great inland seas will not discover them, but may find themselves taught, and harshly, about a different type of search. An aspect of national character lies in a respect for the elusive, the out-of-the-way, the self-deprecating, and alerting quirks in the midst of the ordinary. (7–8)

Here it seems that ‘national traits’ replace the earlier reference to the museum as a space of national identity. This is a serious matter, one that has bedevilled the national museum from its inception. The odd listing of national traits is worrying enough, but the attempt to move from a museum of national identity to one of identity defined through national traits is serious. It conjures up eerie echoes of racialised notions of national traits. But perhaps there is little need to worry. The review includes a paragraph that illustrates further their meaning: ‘the challenge to a museum here is more in the nature of an art than science: to present the ordinary and the everyday in order to open up and reveal the national trait’. (8) The example provided to illustrate this claim is taken from Patrick White, clearly an author approved of by someone on the panel as he gets a second guernsey later in the report. On this occasion *Riders in the Chariot* is the example. White ‘has one of the leading characters lament when a snake is killed by her housekeeper, that she always put milk out for it, sometimes it would let her stand by, but she never quite succeeded in winning its confidence’. (8) I assume that the national trait this example illustrates is ‘respect for the elusive’, a rather rare trait, I would have thought, particularly regarding snakes and not an interpretation White would have sanctioned.

The next paragraph moves from White’s snake to a discussion of Graeme Davison’s submission to the review. Davison argued for what he calls ‘interpretive’ pluralism. He is quoted as saying: ‘A national museum might then expect to play host to several interpretations of the national past, stirring patriotic as well as critical, educationally demanding as well as entertaining’. (8) The panel’s response to Davison’s suggestion is to claim that the difference between their view that ‘there is more consensus than plurality at the core of the national collective conscience’ and his image of ‘plurality and flux’ will not lead to differences in the way judgements are made. (8) This claim is a clear indication of the panel’s failure to understand both Davison’s modest proposal and the concept of the ‘collective conscience’, a term more usually translated as the rather different, collective consciousness. Similarly, the panel fails to grasp the significance and meaning of Benedict Anderson’s term ‘imagined communities’. They reject the notion that ‘national character is a sort of fictitious construct, fluid and subject to rapid change, and therefore ephemeral’ and claim that his ‘view underestimates the deeper continuities in culture’. (8) The examples? ‘The degree to which the portrait of the courageous warrior hero developed in Homer’s *Iliad* three millennia ago has shaped later

images and stories, including, in the twentieth century, both the Australian Anzac legend and the American Western film genre.' (8) In my view, the Anzac legend and its cult of male initiation, brotherhood and death needs to be seen not as a semi-modern manifestation of an ancient enduring imagery but as precisely the kind of refashioning and rapidly changing construct that Anderson's work might illuminate. The problem here is that there is unrecognised slippage between myth and history and history as myth. What the panel is claiming is that, as far as the NMA is concerned, the difference in understandings of the Anzac legend should be resolved rather than contested and, yes, challenged. In other words, the panel's commitment to cultural continuities and cultural 'consensus' provides little space for 'interpretive pluralism'.

By this point, page eight, the groundwork for the panel's particular vision for the NMA is well and truly laid. The museum will tell the Australian story, it will be based on national traits, and it will include Gallipoli (an aspect of the Australian legend assiduously revived, funded and systematically bolstered by the Prime Minister). There is a need for narrative, and some objects can be characterised by their ability to enchant and the museum should have some of them.

As the chapter proceeds, the emphasis on national character traits within the story of Australia increases. What 'achievements, prominent episodes and character traits are vital to the Australian story', (9) they ask. Geoffrey Blainey, a historian with close links to the Prime Minister, identified these as including 'national productivity ... a capacity to feed and clothe millions of non-Australians; pioneers of democracy, especially in relation to women's rights, innovation, usually out of adversity; mining, migration ... the city ... sport and its social links to nationalism and pioneering revaluations of leisure' (9); business, sporting and scientific achievements were mentioned in other submissions.²⁰ Then the review cites 'the more traditional themes of European discovery, exploration, convicts, settlement ... bushrangers, wool and wheat, fire and drought, and so forth'. (9) And finally, the panel offers a statement of faith in identifying our greatest achievement as:

the establishment of a notably stable, efficiently managed, prosperous democracy, with very low levels of institutional corruption, with relatively low social inequality and a largely inclusive ethos, which has integrated immigrant peoples from hundreds of other places with reasonable success. Emblematic was the success of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, as acknowledged by much of the rest of the world. Tied in here are character traits of inclusiveness, a 'fair-go' ethos, a distrust of extremisms and civic common sense. (9)

The trouble with focusing on national character traits is that it generates bad propaganda rather than decent history. They mirror the Prime Minister's view of Australian society and

seem similar to those of David Barnett and Christopher Pearson, and they are certainly free of the guilt that Geoffrey Blainey so deplors. The problem with such very positive statements about the nature of Australian society is that they are so contested. A 'fair go' ethos has to be seen as an ethos so severely circumscribed by the Howard government in its responses to refugees, the needy and poor, working mothers and the desire of gays to marry or even inherit superannuation benefits that it sounds hypocritical rather than a fundamental social commitment. Similarly, the claims for relatively low levels of social inequality look hopeful when set against studies on the polarisation of the distribution of national income, and in the context of Aboriginal disadvantage across so many social indicators. 'Low levels of institutional corruption' seems an odd inclusion but it may depend on where the comparison is being made. In the teeth of a government known for its core and non-core promises, media manipulation in relation to the Tampa refugees, machinations over public funding for the ethanol industry, dissembling as to the legitimate requests of Kurdish refugees, and a disintegrating code of parliamentary conduct, it seems a bold view. However, perhaps the panel sees this behaviour as examples of the mateship that is so central to the Australian story? And as for inclusiveness? It may be that a version of mateship that includes women and gays, and crosses racial boundaries is near at hand.

Because of its importance in establishing the framework for what will follow I have spent rather longer than I would have wished on the detail of the review's second chapter, 'Reflections and Visions'. In summary, I'd suggest that the incoherence of this chapter springs from a number of sources. First, in the absence of a proper review of the relevant literature, the review offers little information to sustain its analysis. Second, it follows from the first point that the chapter does not consider *arguments* about narrative, objects, museum displays. It does not evaluate, discuss, compare or contrast other than in the most superficial way. And third, the writing is so poorly structured and fragmented that it displays a level of incoherence that makes even a close reading very difficult. Indeed, it reads better if you do not seek to read too closely. Later sections of the report dealing with the more technological and less politically salient aspects of the museum are generally much clearer. However, the problem is that the evaluation of the museum's performance and the panel's conclusions about it are based on the earlier garbled, scene-setting chapter. While the members of the panel have undoubtedly acted in good faith, I believe that the need for change at the museum was determined well before the review was begun.

— PLACID ELECTORATES AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

At the beginning of this essay I suggested that an independent national museum has a role in providing a space for public reflection on the nature of the world we live in, our culture,

our society and, of course, our government. I suggested that a healthy democracy depends upon independent public spaces and the moments of reflection they offer. I believe that the members of the review panel would agree with me. However, they support the installation of exhibitions that will tell an Australian story that is far too narrow, too staid, too complacent and, in the end, too unengaging to bring the visitors in and keep them coming back. I believe the review's report is self-defeating and that the political stacking of the National Museum's council will serve no purpose other than spoiling the museum's potential.

That potential can still be realised. Take, for example, the reviewers' suggestion that Captain James Cook should appear in the museum's exhibitions.²¹ Let him be there, a bearer of the Enlightenment values so resisted and devalued by the present government. Let the subversive and fascinating Aboriginal stories of Captain Cook collected by Deborah Rose and others be brought forward so that the Indigenous voice comes through loud and clear, let Cook's deification in the Pacific be explored and let us see him not as one but as many, not as an icon of civilisation and Christianity arriving in an empty and benighted land but as a man of many fragments. Let us see him as real and as mythology, as fragmented and multi-faceted and, yes, as challenging.²² And let us reflect for a moment on the values that Cook stood for, and what has happened to his dreams and ours.

If the museum's exhibitions are reduced to a series of recitations about the arrival of civilisation and the church, promises of infotainment, corporate success and government-approved heroes, if the approved exhibition is the balanced exposition of alternative clichés illuminated through supposedly numinous objects, we will be stuck with Phar Lap's heart and one of Don Bradman's infernal stock of caps and bats for ever more. Surely there is more to life than this? In other words, if the reviewers' suggestions were taken up, we would have to endure a steady diet of clichéd exhibitions and fetishised objects that would be both expensive and intellectually deadening. One can understand why a government would want such a museum, but why would the reviewers? My fear is that where cliché prevails, thought vanishes. With it, goes critical thinking.

That is what's at stake. A placid, self-congratulatory electorate, or a critical, snippy, demanding and questioning one. One that the present government does not really want.

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1. *Review of the National Museum of Australia, its Exhibitions and Public Programs*, a report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.
2. Joyce Morgan, 'Museum Director's Dumping Disappoints', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 2003, p. 2; 'Museum's New Faces', *The Australian*, 29 August 2003, p. 6.
3. Gerard Henderson, 'Howard's Odd Museum Choice', *The Age*, 14 January 2003, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/01/13/1041990231026.html>>.
4. See the analysis offered by Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003. Brett's analysis of the refashioning of a moral community within Australian Protestantism is important in showing the linkages between religious affiliation and the moral community pictured within the Australian legend as it is now being understood.
5. Immediately after the report's release, Bain Attwood made this distinction and expressed grave fears about the prospects for the museum when he spoke to Philip Adams on 'Late Night Live', ABC Radio National, 21 July 2003.
6. J.B. Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 71, pp. 316–37.
7. John Hirst, 'Women and History', *Quadrant*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1995, p. 8. See also Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 117–18.
8. See *Review*, pp. 12–13.
9. Quoted in Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 202.
10. Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wipperman, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 13. Attwood and Foster trace the origin of Blainey's use of the 'black armband' slogan to Geoffrey Blainey, 'Australia: Two Peoples: Two Nations?', *Age*, 12 June 1993, and subsequent articles, including 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant*, vol. 37, nos 7–8, 1993, p. 15; see Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. 29, note 39. Macintyre and Clark give more detail in *The History Wars*. For a discussion of Blainey's history writing, see Julie Marcus, 'The Past of Geoffrey Blainey', *The Age Monthly Review*, 12–13 February 1989.
11. Pearson's own account of his political interventions and role can be found in his speech to the George Munster journalism forum at the University of Technology, Sydney (n.d.) <http://acij.uts.edu.au/old_acij/munster/f4pearson>.
12. The museum was funded through the government's Federation Fund, a fund established as part of the negotiations involved in partly privatising Telstra. From the sale \$A1 billion was promised for significant national projects.
13. After careful consideration of the relevant international conventions and definitions, the commission's report concluded:
The policy of forcible removal of children from Indigenous Australians to other groups for the purpose of raising them separately from and ignorant of their culture and people could properly be labelled "genocidal" in breach of binding international law from at least 11 December 1946 ... the practice continued for almost another quarter of a century.
Bringing Them Home: A Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997, p. 275. For an account of earlier resistance to the use of the term, see Macintyre and Clark.
14. For his attack on cultural studies, see Keith Windshuttle, 'Journalism versus Cultural Studies', *Australian Studies in Journalism*, vol. 7, 1998, pp. 3–31. In this paper Windshuttle rehearses many of the themes put forward in his attacks on historians and his call for an empirical history based on known and verifiable facts.
15. Keith Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History', *Quadrant*, vol. 44, nos 10–12, 2000, pp. 8–21, 17–24, 6–20; the conference papers are published in Attwood and Foster.
16. *Sydney Morning Herald* archives, 'The David Barnett Memo', accessed 26 August 2003, available at <<http://old.smh.com.au/news/0106/06/features/features21.html>>.
17. 'The David Barnett Memo'.
18. John Carroll, *The Western Dreaming: The Western World is Dying for Want of a Story*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2001.
19. Gerard Henderson, 'Howard's Odd Museum Choice', *Age*, 14 January 2003, accessed 26 August 2003, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/01/13/1041990231026.html>>.

20. See also Andrew Clark, 'In Their Own Image', *Australian Financial Review Report*, March 2001, p. 36.
21. *Review*, pp. 18–9, 23. In a recent critique Linda Young makes the point that Cook memorabilia is available in other museums in Australia and is also scattered around overseas collections from which it is difficult to extract. Linda Young, 'Review in Question', *Muse*, October 2003, p. 7.
22. See, for example, Deborah Bird Rose, 'The Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2, 1984, pp. 24–39; E. Kolig, 'Captain Cook in the Western Kimberley', in Ronald and Catherine Berndt (eds), *Aborigines of the West: Their Past and Their Present*, University of WA Press, Perth, 1980, pp. 274–82; Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1985.