

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

Submission from H C Burmester

The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories will inquire into and report on the range of innovative strategies that Canberra's national institutions are using to maintain viability and relevance to sustainably grow their profile, visitor numbers, and revenue, including:

- 1. creating a strong brand and online presence;*
- 2. experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation;*
- 3. conducting outreach outside of Canberra;*
- 4. cultivating private sector support;*
- 5. developing other income streams; and*
- 6. ensuring the appropriateness of governance structures; and*

any other relevant matter the Committee wishes to examine, including the process for establishing new institutions.

Ambiguities in the Terms of Reference.

The terms of reference (ToR) are ambiguous in three key respects.

First, what are the “Canberra national institutions” that fall within the scope of this inquiry?

On first glance perhaps it is just the tourist tripper's big 7 diverse delights, i.e. the National Library of Australia, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, the Museum of Australian Democracy embedded at Old Parliament House, Questacon: the National Science and Technology Centre and the Australian War Memorial.

For a person enamoured with brutalist buildings and national process within the parliamentary triangle perhaps the High Court of Australia is a “Canberra national institution”. Those with a different focus might regard the Royal Australian Mint in Deakin as a “Canberra national institution”.

But wait, there's more to consider. Let's not forget the National Electoral Education Centre, the National Archives of Australia, the National Youth Science Forum, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, the Australian National Botanic Gardens, the National Arboretum Canberra, the National Rock Garden Canberra, the National Zoo and Aquarium, and the National Dinosaur Museum. Finally, should the

Committee's examination of "Canberra's national institutions" include the Australian National University and the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia?

Second, can a diverse set of institutions be meaningfully considered together?

The aforementioned (and no doubt incomplete) catalogue of potential "Canberra national institutions" demonstrates that they are a very diverse lot. All receive support from the taxpayer either directly (e.g. an allocation in the federal budget) or indirectly (e.g. a tax subsidy or a land grant). Some are governed by institution specific pieces of Commonwealth legislation that reflect historical circumstance while others are simply subject to the broader laws of the land. Some do have a main focus on "profile, visitor numbers and revenue" but others have many objectives underlying their operation.

"Innovative strategies" that might be appropriate for the NGA may not be wholly appropriate for its near neighbour the High Court of Australia. The National Library of Australia, whose Act emphasises it is about "maintaining and developing a national collection of library material, including a comprehensive collection of library material relating to Australia and the Australian people", possibly should not be overly focused on "growing visitor numbers".

Third, the Committee's ToR seem to imply a 'one size fits all' success model for this very diverse range of national institutions.

For example, they assume that viability and relevance can only be determined by narrow criteria, namely "profile, visitor numbers and revenue". This may reflect the mindset of the central coordinating Departments, such as Department of Finance, but it fails to recognise the particular and different heritage, cultural, intellectual, research and conservation responsibilities of the various institutions.

As a society we grapple with 'measuring' output and outcomes, we often seek refuge in valid quantifiable units such as 'bums on seats', 'clicks on a web page' and/or amount of funds raised from non-government sources. We neglect to weigh up these readily measurable factors with the 'other world' of less tangible but much valued qualitative attributes such as collection development, reflection of national identity and aesthetic/scientific/literary merit. Knocking off 'back room' research staff and expanding 'front of house' shop staff might boost "visitor numbers and revenue" but too often leads to a decline in the quality of what these "Canberra national institutions" are set up to do.

"...any other relevant matter which the Committee wishes to examine..."

The 'one size fits all' success model ignores a particular difficulty that seems to plague most "Canberra national institutions" funded by the federal budget – that is public funding is often available for new policy proposals but funding for vital ongoing programmes is subject to perpetual cuts particularly via ongoing efficiency dividends. The ability of many national institutions to develop new policy proposals is, by virtue of their charter/function, severely limited.

This is the 'elephant in the room' which the core ToR seem designed to avoid. Any inquiry cannot properly address the core ToR issues without directly confronting this fundamental funding problem faced by all the federally funded "Canberra national institutions". This should definitely be an "other relevant matter the Committee wishes to examine". Yes, non-government sources of funds are important to many "Canberra national institutions" but too often these funds are understandably directed towards high profile acquisitions or activities that readily give a 'donor dividend' whilst the fundamental fabric that underpins institutions remains chronically under resourced because of a declining annual government appropriation.

Other issues

The assumption behind the ToR reflects one of the major reasons for a decline in the ability of the institutions to discharge their primary functions, namely the pressure for them to be places of 'entertainment'.

Success seems to be measured by visitor numbers regardless of function and the institutions appear to be forced to compete with each other. Only in this way do they seem able to convince government to reward them with a small funding increase. In many instances this has led to demeaning and inappropriate management decisions to prioritise 'colour and movement' at the expense of important professional core responsibilities of the particular institutions. In this regard the ToR ignore the responsibility of government to fund the national institutions to enable them to discharge their important cultural and heritage responsibilities that require hard, consistent hidden work that, in the long run, underpins much 'colour and movement' activities.

The ToR appear to assume that private sector support is an essential strategy to ensure the viability of the institutions yet fail to address the prior issue of the appropriateness of certain private sector support or its proper role in certain of the institutions. There is a real issue whether in some instances particular institutions have already been compromised by their acceptance of certain outside funding.

A number of specific comments in relation to particular institutions follow.

The Australian War Memorial (AWM)

This body has been generously funded in comparison to other national institutions yet its public pronouncements indicate an insatiable need for more funds. It seems to have transformed itself from a 'commemorative memorial' humbly remembering the horrors of war to a 'celebration' of all things military, e.g. corporate dinners underneath the "G for George" bomber, facilitating children dressing up in military uniforms, emphasising hardware but downplaying the lasting psychological damage of war. Sombre commemoration has been destabilised by a focus on how more visitors can be attracted. One wonders if future plans might include installation of mothballed frigates and submarines on Lake Burley Griffin. The latest announced underground building plans, to construct space for "helicopters and jet fighters", involve an extraordinary amount of money (\$500 million). There are alternatives,

such as a new annex on the rear carpark or acquiring a modest portion of the land immediately behind AWM. Any proposal for further space needs to be critically and robustly examined by the Parliament.

In addition, there may be real harm being done to the AWM as an institution by its eagerness to accept outside money. There appears to be some dubious decisions which, in one instance, appears to have led it to be compromised by a foreign government, China. See the report of this incident in C. Hamilton, *Silent Invasion*, (2018), pp245-7. This highlights the risks of an uncritical willingness to accept outside funding. The Committee needs to probe this issue more deeply.

National Library of Australia (NLA)

The NLA appears to have an undue focus on accessibility of its existing collections as well as attracting visitors with exhibitions and events. It seems to have lost sight of one of its core responsibilities, namely to develop and grow its collection, rather relying largely on what it already has and the Australian deposit scheme. Its collection policy is an embarrassment in its timidity and lack of vision. One gets the sense that if it was offered a significant literary collection that fell a little outside the narrow policy it would not embrace it but reject it on the basis that new collections or additions to its holdings were not important given everything will soon be digitised and given its lack of resources to catalogue and integrate new collections. Instead the Library prefers to buy objects to display which add little to the intellectual wealth of the nation.

The excuse that other libraries such as the US Library of Congress are digitising everything they hold and hence it is no longer important for the NLA to put energy and resources into acquiring new historical collections is short sighted. It will result in a significant diminution in the intellectual resources available to the Australian nation for research and scholarship.

The Committee should examine whether the serious financial constraints the NLA has suffered mean it has put a disproportionate focus on accessibility of its present collection and caused it to abandon all but the bare minimum when it comes to development and building of its collections. It is ultimately these collections that define the quality of a library, not how many visitors come to an exhibition.

National Gallery of Australia (NGA)

The NGA has downgraded its contribution to research and in the pursuit of ever increasing numbers of visitors overemphasised entertainment. Its choices as to exhibitions seem to be guided more by 'shock' (cf naked *Hyper Real* events) or 'object' appeal (cf *Cartier* exhibition) than artistic merit or significance. One example of this entertainment emphasis and distorted priorities is neatly illustrated by what confronts visitors immediately after entering the main front door of the NGA building – they are confronted by an unattractive play space for children.

National Archives of Australia (NAA)

The impact of financial constraints on the NAA has been demonstrated by my own experience. It took 4 years to get access to files in the open access period (ie

records more than 30 years old) because of a lack of resources to review the files and no ability to require originating Departments to undertake on a timely basis their input into the review requirements. To be told you have a right to appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal about a non-decision is no solace. Inadequate numbers of reviewers and an inability to require departments to fulfil their review functions meant my research project was curtailed. My enthusiasm to use archive material in other future research projects has evaporated after my experience. Timely access to archive material is an important component of any research into the history of past Australian government activities. The Archives currently fails to meet its core responsibilities. The NAA Director-General in recent statements announced further staff cuts but appeared to downplay the crisis in which the institution finds itself. Financial constraints are at the heart of this situation and no increase in visitor numbers or private funding will address this fundamental problem.

Conclusion

This submission has sought to highlight what appear to be fundamental problems in the diverse Canberra national institutions arising out of budgetary pressures.

It is submitted that these pressures have distorted the priorities of the various institutions, leading them to focus on how they can be entertainment centres and dining/café destinations attracting ever-increasing visitor numbers. This has come at a huge price in their failure to effectively carry out key core functions. At least one institution appears to have compromised itself in the quest for outside money and the risk of this with other institutions is real.

This Committee needs to give careful consideration to how the various institutions can best carry out all their important public functions – both ‘front of house’ and ‘back room’. However, the present priorities the institutions have been forced to adopt by financial pressures are problematic and the undue focus on a few criteria like visitor numbers to measure success is often misplaced or over-emphasised.

No one model should be applied to the diverse institutions when assessing how to ensure their “viability and relevance”. Rather, individual consideration needs to be given to their particular role and responsibilities. The need for adequate ongoing government funding remains critical to the success of these institutions in the long run.