

Prof. Peter Stanley, FAHA

**Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works
‘Australian War Memorial Project’**

I tender the following submission to the Committee outlining my reservations about and objections to the so-called ‘Australian War Memorial Project’; that is, the \$498m expansion of the institution’s buildings and proposed associated displays.

I have a long-standing association with the Australian War Memorial. I commenced working at the Memorial in May 1980 and served it for 27 years as an historian. I was appointed its first (and so far only) Principal Historian in 1998 and remained in that position until February 2007, when I left to become Director of the Research Centre of the National Museum of Australia. In February 2013 I became Research Professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW Canberra. I have published over 36 books and many articles, mostly in Australian military history, including one which was jointly awarded the Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History in 2011. I am regarded as one of Australia’s leading military historians, and am certainly its pre-eminent military social historian.

The Memorial remains an important place for me. It gave me some of my most rewarding experiences as an historian and I was a part of its development in a crucial phase of its recent history. I yield to no one my regard and affection for it as an institution. It remains an important national institution and is a vital cultural resource. It is for that reason that I am fiercely opposed to the present expansion, for reasons I outline in this submission.

The case for the proposed expansion has been poorly articulated and justified. The Memorial has not demonstrated that it has suffered any undue harm to its fabric or, more importantly, its collection. It has not shown that there is any stated need to increase its space on the Campbell site, or that it has suffered by any comparison with comparable national collecting institutions. (Indeed, the Memorial has consistently been better funded and protected from budgetary cuts in comparison to other national institutions.) It has not produced any evidence to show, for example, that its international counterparts display greater proportions of their collections. It is, indeed, difficult to understand why the proposed expansion has been mooted at all. The Memorial’s case for obtaining a huge and disproportionate funding is in fact hard to comprehend.

Further, the changes which the nation has confronted since the proposal was first mooted – notably the 2019-20 bushfires and the Covid-19 crisis and the associated social and economic effects – are of such magnitude to demand a re-assessment of the expenditure of almost \$500m. As a nation, Australia must be given an opportunity to question whether an expenditure entered into without adequate public consultation should continue to be allowed to proceed. The consultation which the Memorial has conducted, mostly in 2018-19 – before the impact of the successive crises of 2019-20 – was unworthy of the name. It was highly selective, partisan in the composition of those consulted and mendacious in the reporting of the results. Surveys conducted by bodies other than the Memorial disclosed substantial opposition to or scepticism of the need for the expansion.

The argument that the proposed expansion would enhance the Memorial as a ‘therapeutic milieu’ for veterans of recent conflicts – a crucial part of the case for the expansion – is particularly dubious. No evidence has been adduced to support this assertion, which is entirely based upon anecdotes (and for which anecdotes could readily be provided to contest the assertion). The idea that the Memorial has any therapeutic role is not in accord with the *Australian War Memorial Act*, the legislation governing the institution. Emotion must be recognised in history – I have written extensively about its importance in understanding military history – but it is a very poor basis for policy, and in this case the Memorial’s claims are risible and irrelevant.

The present proposal is also flawed by the idea that the Memorial ‘belongs’ particularly to veterans (and that the Defence Force and veterans’ bodies have a special ‘stake’ in the institution). This idea has no basis in reality or indeed in the Act and needs to be questioned and contested. The Memorial belongs to *all* Australians – or should, if it is to retain its regard and relevance. The proposed expansion of its physical presence, based on the Memorial’s representations of the projected exhibitions, would have the absolutely disastrous corollary that it would become the preserve of a relatively small segment of the Australian community, turning it into what would become a regimental museum-cum-healing centre, but failing as the national cultural institution the Act envisages it to be. If such a profound change is to occur, the Act itself should be freely debated by the people and the Parliament, as occurred before the passing of the 1980 Act.

As an institution, the Memorial devoted a great deal of effort and energy to understanding how the institution (and especially its museum) should become more attractive and informative to all Australians. This effort, in which I played a small part (as, for example, Concept Leader of the Second World War gallery opened in 1999) was predicated on the Memorial being accessible to all Australians, and others. The present proposal would discard this foundational idea – without any public consultation – and have the Memorial serve particular groups, treating visitors as spectators rather than as citizens with diverse experiences, values and attitudes toward war and its effects. For example, the Gallery Re-development Plan which underpinned the Gower-era re-developments was based on a sophisticated understanding how large technology objects could be used to communicate the interpretation of history. The present proposal is based on no comparable museological insight. It merely uses aircraft (including ones which saw negligible operational service) as impressive window-dressing. This approach has rightly been condemned by many museum professionals who have taken the trouble to understand how such items can be used.

Given my experience of and affection for the Memorial I would of course acknowledge the Memorial’s necessary relationship with and reliance on veterans, especially in building and interpreting its collections. But that productive and positive relationship is being grotesquely distorted by the implications of the present proposal – again, without the wide-ranging and open discussion of whether such a profound change is justified or supported by Australians as a whole. This necessary public debate should encompass not just the specific question of whether half-a-billion dollars should be spent on the half-baked present proposal, but on the vital question of how Australia cares for those who have served in the Defence Force.

The proposed expansion therefore has the potential to skew and unbalance an institution which works well enough (even if in need of further change, something that needs to be debated. I would point out that my opposition to this proposal is not merely that of a person wedded to an unchanging institution. In my time at the Memorial I was a part of helping to make the Memorial relevant and responsive to the Australian people, and I see a great need for further changes – to recognise the fact and significance of frontier conflicts, for example, or to acknowledge that many new Australians are citizens because of wars in which Australia did not formally participate but which are now part of the historical experience of its people, and should be recognised by the Memorial. I am not trying to retain the Memorial which I helped to create: I am trying to arrest the undue expansion of the physical site and its contents which would unbalance an institution too important to be so cavalierly and unreflectively changed so completely.

Having argued that the present proposal is unnecessary and poorly conceived and unjustified, I would further content that the particular proposal (involving the demolition of the prize-winning and perfectly functional Anzac Hall) is appallingly wasteful. As the Committee has surely been advised by others better qualified than me, the Memorial already possesses in its Mitchell campus a site which could be used to address the Memorial's collection storage needs for decades (a need the expansion of the main building will minimally relate). Others will have shown that for an expenditure of very much less than half-a-billion dollars the Memorial could obtain the storage and collection preservation facilities it requires at Mitchell, and avoid the otiose and expensive planned expansion at Campbell. In short, the proposed expansion cannot be shown to be more cost-effective than the alternatives, and at the very least should surely recommend that the proposal be re-examined to establish whether it is justified and could be accomplished at a cost more commensurate with the need and the nation's resources.

Others, again, more highly qualified than me in heritage and procedural matters, have shown that the process by which the Memorial has already embarked on this expansion are at least questionable and have been duplicitous, and certainly fall short of the standards of public probity we rightly demand of our national institutions.

I trust that the Committee will appreciate that my submission arises from a long association with the Memorial, and a deep knowledge of it as an institution and its relationship with Australia and its people. That profound understanding leads me to beseech you to act as the final legislative guardians of a treasured national institution, one which is in danger of being gravely damaged by those who profess to value it but who in truth have a poor understanding of what it is they are messing with.

Prof. Peter Stanley, FAHA
UNSW Canberra
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