

Dr Peter Stanley

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Office of the Clerk Assistant (Committees)
House of Representatives
PO Box 620
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into the administration of the National Memorials Ordinance 1928

I wish to make a submission to the inquiry, in the capacity of a private individual, though one with an expert knowledge of aspects of the subject of the inquiry.

I am an historian of (among other things) Australia's wars. I have published 24 books, most in the field of Australian military/social history, and including a dozen books specifically dealing with Australia's experience and memory of the two world wars. I have written extensively on these subjects in articles, papers, chapters and reviews, and have contributed to the creation of exhibitions and films in these areas. For 27 years I worked at the Australian War Memorial, and from 1987 to 2007 was its senior historian under various titles.

I am also a member of the Lake War Memorials Forum, an informal, grass-roots and diverse alliance of individuals and community groups which for various reasons oppose the construction of the proposed world wars memorials. For a time, between October 2010 and April 2011 I acted as a spokesperson for and co-convenor of the Forum and wrote and spoke on the subject in the local media.

I have arranged my submission under three headings: 'Procedural concerns', 'Historical concerns' and 'Recommendations'.

Procedural concerns

My comments on the administration by the National Capital Authority (NCA) of the National Memorials Ordinance 1928 arise from my dismay at the way the ordinance has been used in the process of the NCA's approval and promotion of the proposed world wars memorials. I believe that the NCA's stewardship of the ordinance and its management of the Canberra National Memorials Committee has been seriously flawed – indeed, represents a disgraceful dereliction of its responsibilities. I very much hope that the present inquiry can identify and recommend ways of fixing the problems that have caused so much public disquiet, not least over the world wars memorials proposal. As an expert in only some of the areas addressed by this inquiry, I defer to the submissions made by other members of the Lake War Memorials Forum, especially when they relate to heritage and administrative matters, but will bring to the inquiry's attention several points and offer related recommendations.

It is clear that the Canberra National Memorials Committee has in the case of the world wars memorials failed to operate effectively. It became evident, through documents obtained by the Forum through Freedom of Information requests, that the Committee had not only not included community representatives and had failed to consult as the ordinance envisaged, but that its deliberations had mostly not even included the political representation that it required in order to function properly. Rather than scrutinise and decide on NCA proposals, it has become a rubber stamp for the operation of the NCA's view of what should or should not proceed. My first recommendation therefore is that the present inquiry should ensure that the Committee operates at least as the 1928 ordinance stipulated.

It is also clear in the case of the proposed world wars memorials that the NCA has displayed a reprehensible partiality in its dealings with the memorials' proponents. It has unduly favoured the case of one unrepresentative group while not seeking, and in effect rejecting, opportunities to discern the public's interest in and attitude toward the proposed memorials. Regardless of the merits of the case for or against the world war memorials, this partiality represents the most disquieting feature of the episode, a serious flaw in operation of the agency in a pluralist democratic system.

Over the past year we have seen a controversy conducted between proponents and opponents of these proposed memorials, for which the NCA has allocated a site on the Rond Terraces by the shore of Lake Burley Griffin. (The process of the allocation of the site, as other submissions will doubtless demonstrate, was itself in breach of the NCA's own guidelines, but that is not my main point.) My point is to illustrate how far the NCA has failed to assess and act upon the interests and needs of the public, but has instead selectively abetted the interests of an unrepresentative group, the Memorials(s) Development Committee (MDC). Exactly why the NCA chose to give this group such privileged access to the Canberra National Memorials Committee, to allocate a site and generally advance its interests has not been explained or justified.

The controversy has been played out at public meetings, on the Lake War Memorials Forum website, in the pages of the *Canberra Times*, on local radio and television and through contact with politicians and officials. The controversy has seen a small group, a private company, the MDC, ranged against the Lake War Memorials Forum. Surveying the mass of material this debate produced suggests several telling conclusions. It is clear that the proposed memorials are extremely unpopular, for reasons articulated by members and friends of the Forum in many letters, articles and web-site comments published over the past year. While dozens of opponents wrote letters to the *Canberra Times*, those in favour published very few letters, and then only by the MDC's spokesperson, Mike Buick. The Lake War Memorials Forum website invited contributions from both those in favour and against, and could still only find eight in favour compared to over 350 against. The Forum held a public meeting in March at which over 300 people turned out to express their opposition. It is clear that the world wars memorials proposal has very little public support. It is also notable that, judging from the public meetings, those most opposed to them are veterans of various kinds, those who lived through the Second World War or are the children of these people, most aged over 50. (It is significant that the MDC has signally failed to garner support from ex-service bodies, and that RSL sub-branches in Canberra have actually voted unanimously against supporting it.)

Had the NCA sought the views of the public at almost any point in the process this disparity in support would have been clear. Instead, what occurred – as has been abundantly demonstrated in various ways, including testimony by NCA representatives to the Senate Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories – was that the NCA recklessly and improperly adopted and fostered MDC's case. This alliance between a protagonist and a supposedly disinterested government agency has in the case of the world war memorials plainly acted against the expressed wishes of the public. For the health of a functioning democracy the NCA's manner of proceeding cannot be allowed to continue.

It is clear that the NCA has neither administered the Canberra National Memorials Committee in the spirit of the ordinance, nor operated disinterestedly in relation to commemorative proposals put to it. Had the agency been able to call upon representative or expert members (as was intended in 1928) then it is possible that the NCA would not have found itself in the embarrassing position of having championed a proposal that is regarded as risible, offensive or superfluous by so many people. As it is, we have seen the unedifying sight of the NCA's representatives either admitting that the agency has not followed its own guidelines or disclosing a partiality and favouritism that it has not justified, and indeed cannot justify. Exactly why and how the MDC was granted such extraordinary access to the NCA and was accorded such preferential treatment remains unexplained.

Historical concerns

Of greatest concern to me as an historian, and of particular concern in an edifice purporting to represent history, is the proposed memorials' inadequacy as statements reflecting both the experience of the world wars and those conflicts' place in Australian memory.

Had the NCA sought expert advice from historical experts it would have learned of the many flaws in MDC's proposal and the design it has developed. Even setting aside the heritage, ideological and aesthetic objections to the memorials (and they are forceful and persuasive) it is evident that the memorials as the MDC has explained them would be unworkable as historical interpretations. I draw your attention to the following points.

- The proponents' fundamental motivating contention, that the world wars have been inadequately recognised and commemorated in Australia or in Canberra, is manifestly false. The proponents' arguments on this count, in that they misrepresent the function and standing of the Australian War Memorial, are mendacious in the extreme. No responsible public agency (such as the NCA claims to be) could reasonably have given them credence by favouring the proponents' case, particularly without testing the veracity and sustainability of their contentions.
- Far from fostering a fitting commemoration of Australia's war dead, the proposed memorials would in fact have the effect of weakening the commemoration of Australia's war dead. The proponents' architect has designed the monoliths to catch the sun at dawn on 25 April and 11 a.m. on 11 November, for obvious symbolic reasons. This is inspired by a seemingly worthy sentiment, but it would immediately set the memorials in competition with the nearby Australian War Memorial, which holds the national memorial ceremonies at exactly those times. Which ceremony

would the public and elected officials choose? How could ceremonies occurring within sight and earshot of each other be reconciled? Why did the NCA not see this conflict and seek to address it? Geoff Pryor's cartoon (included in the Lake War Memorials Forum submission) makes this point concisely and forcefully.

- The MDC has repeatedly argued that the world war memorials would accord with 'other' memorials on Anzac Parade commemorating other conflicts in which Australia has been involved, such as the Korean and Vietnam war memorials. This is utterly misleading. First, the proposed world war memorials are *not* allocated to Anzac Parade (the designated locus of the commemoration of war). The NCA has allocated them a site on the Rond Terraces, a different site altogether which has explicitly not been intended (according to the NCA's own guidelines) for the commemoration of war. Second, this simple comparison in fact exposes the proponents' misunderstanding of the historical circumstances surrounding the creation of the Korean and Vietnam memorials. In fact they were justifiable on the grounds that those conflicts had not been adequately recognised compared to the world wars. The same argument cannot possibly be applied to commemoration of the world wars – the subject not just of memorials on Anzac Parade, but also of much of the adjoining Australian War Memorial itself. In short, the proponents cannot have it both ways, and their efforts to justify their proposal in these terms demonstrates how poorly they understand the context of the commemoration of war in Australia.
- The MDC has misleadingly argued that its memorials will not duplicate the Australian War Memorial, but intends that they will include panels listing the names of the (uniformed) dead of the world wars. In that this is exactly what lies at the heart of the Australian War Memorial, it is not clear why a new, large and expensive memorial is required at all.
- The MDC's proposal includes the distribution of the names of Australia's dead under the name of the locality from which they hailed. They evidently have not tested the feasibility of this seemingly obvious idea with anyone who knew their way around the relevant records. They would have learned that to allocate the dead to one locality is impossible – as the Australian War Memorial discovered when it tried to do exactly that for its Roll of Honour over sixty years ago. (The fact is that service records repeatedly demonstrate discrepancies between individuals' places of birth, residence and enlistment, and that commemoration of one name in one place is both impossible and misleading.)
- The architect's design comprises two 20-metre tall monoliths. Even without the very substantial objection that these edifices compromise Walter Burley Griffin's vision for the site (arguments made elsewhere), these monoliths have been questioned by many. Stylistically they are certainly outside the Australian tradition of commemorating war and its costs. They smack of the triumphal, and have often been decried publicly as 'fascist', as reminiscent of Mussolini's Italy or Speer's Germany. The proponents seem not to be aware that several thousand Australians died in war against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. This coincidence seems unfortunate at best, a further example of how the proponents neither possess (nor have sought) an expert

understanding of Australia's experience of the world wars, and of how they have advanced their plans without an adequate understanding of the Australian tradition of commemorating war. If there is a need to commemorate the world wars separately (and I would argue that there is not) then this structure is certainly not the way to do it. Having been criticised as unduly monolithic, the design at the very least needs to be re-conceived to reflect Australia's actual experience of war and in accordance with its well-developed traditions in commemorating war.

That the MDC proposed these follies demonstrates the inadequacy of its thinking and of its plans. (I could offer a detailed critique of historical errors and fatuities in its web-site, brochure and pronouncements, but will not waste the inquiry's time.) But it is a private body; it is allowed to expend energy advocating the unnecessary, the undesirable and the impossible. The NCA, however, appears to have simply endorsed and abetted its risible intentions, and that dereliction is not excusable. (It must have been either chronically badly advised or directed; matters beyond the scope of this inquiry.) The NCA appears to have accepted the MDC's unsustainable argument that the Australian War Memorial does not adequately commemorate the Australian dead of the world wars. This proposition, one vociferously contested by many of the memorials' opponents, makes a mockery of the NCA's claim to have acted as a responsible public body.

Adding these points to the even more substantial criticisms of the process made in the more detailed submission made by the Lake War Memorials Forum itself, I would argue that the Minister could do no less than thoroughly overhaul the NCA and its processes. I very much hope that this inquiry leads the Minister to act decisively to rescind the privileged site granted so irregularly to the MDC for the proposed memorials.

Recommendations

I could not better the recommendations proposed in the detailed and authoritative submission made by the Lake War Memorials Forum. However, I earnestly enjoin the inquiry to propose key recommendations relating to it, namely:

- that the National Capital Memorials Committee be reformed in accordance with the spirit of the original ordinance;
- that the National Capital Authority make efforts to determine and act upon community feeling and cease to demonstrate partiality toward unrepresentative private groups, and;
- that the Minister rescind the land allocated for the site of the proposed world wars memorials.

I would be very happy to enlarge upon my submission should the inquiry require it.

Yours faithfully

Dr Peter Stanley