

The Hon Darren Chester MP
Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

\$498M AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL EXPANSION

Thank you for Robert Curtin's reply of 25 July 2019 to my letter to the Prime Minister of 19 June 2019. That reply rather missed the main points of my letter so I restate them here in hope of a more fruitful exchange. This is clearly a matter for the responsible Minister and the Government as a whole, not just for the Memorial.

The people of Australia have every right to know and understand the military and peacekeeping operations our servicemen and servicewomen are, or have been recently, engaged in. But these operations are not without controversy and they should be outside the realm of a national history museum until proper evaluation on historical principles can be made of the evidence. The Memorial should until then step carefully.

While we honour all Australians who serve our country there are important distinctions between wars in their relative significance and in the numbers involved. Of the nearly 103 000 people named on the Memorial's Roll of Honour, 99 per cent were killed before 1950. In the last 70 years, just over 1000 have died in action. The Memorial is obliged to present a historically-balanced telling of the Australian experience of war.

Mr Curtin's reply also focusses on the Memorial's well-intended efforts to offer therapeutic services for veterans suffering from PTSD and other health issues, and create "dedicated spaces for veterans and their families to retreat, reflect and come to terms with their service". These are not Memorial functions. The *Australian War Memorial Act 1980* sets out (Sections 5 and 6), the functions and powers of the Memorial. Servicemen, servicewomen and veterans figure nowhere in the Act. Services to current service people and veterans lie properly with Veterans' Affairs and Defence; they are not for museum persons or of amateur psychotherapists located in museums.

A former President of the Medical Association for Prevention of War, Dr Margaret Beavis, has said "the [Memorial's] healing claim is an astonishing trivialisation of the complexity and long-term treatment needed to successfully treat mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. The \$498 million spent on the war memorial is \$498 million not spent on veterans' health care ..." (*Canberra Times*, 24 April 2019)

The centrepiece of the Memorial's proposed expansion is some 10-11 000 square metres of new gallery space for recently retired Defence Large Technology Objects (LTO) – aircraft, helicopters, military vehicles and more – used by Australian forces, predominantly in the Middle East. In the process the award-winning Anzac Hall is to be demolished and replaced by a larger warehouse-like structure to park the LTO.

Is space-gobbling LTO the best use of prime space? Is it more about the display of military hardware and technology for devotees and enthusiasts and less about commemoration? (An F-111 to hold "pride of place" with no combat history.) Will it push the Memorial further down the path towards being a military museum, which it is not nor was ever intended to be? ("The Memorial ranks among the world's great national monuments": AWM website.)

The Memorial is one of a kind, a great and proud tribute to Australian sacrifices in war. It is a national icon and museum professionals and others with deep knowledge of the Memorial find it

difficult to understand why an alternative Mitchell development – at a fraction of the cost of the planned expansion – was dismissed as “not under consideration” (Robert Curtin).

What then is the Memorial up to with its new development of state-of-the-art storage and exhibition facilities in Mitchell to accommodate its LTO for up to 100 years? Stage one of this development was opened recently and offers 5288 square metres of top-level space at an overall cost of \$16.1m, i.e. \$3045 per square metre. Meanwhile, the Memorial expansion is expected to deliver 11 032 square metres of new gallery space at a project cost of \$498m; i.e. \$ 45 141 per square metre.

On these projections, new gallery space at Campbell will cost more than 14 times as much per square metre as that in Mitchell. And it is duplication of space for the LTO collection.

Government may not appreciate that Mitchell is a rapidly growing regional centre in Canberra’s north-east with far to go to achieve its full potential. The Memorial and the National Museum established an early presence in Mitchell and the National Archives has recently opened a new facility nearby. They now have light rail service almost to the door.

Many major museums around the world have multiple locations; the Imperial War Museum has five sites across the United Kingdom. IWM Duxford, an hour north of London, is the home of the Museum’s collection of aircraft, military vehicles, artillery and minor naval vessels; spread over seven exhibition buildings, it also provides storage space for other collections. Duxford is a world-class centre and a benchmark for the development of Mitchell as the optimum location for the Memorial’s LTO collection.

The Memorial’s assertion that the expansion has received overwhelming support is simply not true. Public opposition to the expansion has been loud and compelling, as set out on the Honest History website (honesthistory.net.au). The open letter of 23 March 2019, signed by 83 distinguished Australians, has been followed by strong and continuing reactions in press reports and articles, petitions, letters, and engagement with local communities appalled by the prospect. It is very clear that thinking Australians do not want their Memorial desecrated and turned into a military hardware museum, a warehouse-like building for weapons of war, or a theme park, shifting the balance irrevocably away from the Memorial’s central commemorative purpose.

In a recent Canberra Times poll 80% of those canvassed said ‘Yes’ to a question whether the expansion should be dropped. The Memorial’s three previous directors*, all of long experience, have lent not a word of encouragement or support.

Mitchell offers, like Duxford, a quality, cost-effective arrangement for the exhibition, storage, and integrated conservation and maintenance of the Memorial’s LTO collection. If Government were to take up the Mitchell option the Memorial would be kept as most Australians wish. The institution would achieve genuine gains in space and flexibility. Anzac Hall would remain and be “fit for purpose”. And the sizeable saving in public money might be directed towards the pressing mental and other health issues facing so many servicemen and servicewomen and veterans.

Public opinion Australia-wide would support a Government decision to drop the controversial \$498m expansion and advance the Mitchell development in the best interests of the Memorial and the nation.

Yours sincerely

Brendon Kelson

30 August 2019

(Mr Kelson is temporarily in hospital. Letter signed on his behalf and at his request)

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* Major General SN Gower (Rtd) AO, Director, AWM 1996-2012; Australian Army 1959-96

BE Kelson, Director, AWM 1990-94, Deputy Director, 1982-90; Secretary and Manager, National Gallery 1977-81; Assistant Secretary, PM&C 1973-77

KW Pearson AO, Director, AWM 1987-90, Deputy Secretary, DVA 1984-87; Chief Commonwealth Electoral Officer 1976-84; First Assistant Secretary, PM&C 1973-76