

The Australian War Memorial should be for all Australians, not just veterans: submission regarding AWM Development Project

– Michael Piggott, AM; 31/7/2020

Basis of submission

When Brendan Nelson retired in August 2019, the former AWM Director called critics opposed to the development project “a facile minority out of touch with the rest of the country”, adding they were a “small group of people – intellectuals, academics, some retired public servants, even some former staff member who left this place 20 years ago”.¹ In similar vein, earlier this month, the AWM Council chair described critics as being mostly from Canberra, and by inference therefore to be dismissed.²

Accordingly, having lived in Canberra for 49 years and worked for the War Memorial for a decade I assume that my views will be discounted. I am also not in one of the AWM’s preferred stakeholder groups, being neither a serving member of the ADF nor, having never experienced even a single day of continuous military service, a veteran. And I do not have a medical background – apparently necessary, according to the Council chair, to assess the efficacy of a therapeutic milieu at the Memorial for veterans.³

Even so, I want my objections on record and counted among those who do not support the development. My views draw on relevant emotional associations and professional experience:

- Members on both sides of my parents’ families have served in war, and some are represented with their units on the 1914-18 and 1939-45 panels of the Roll of Honour; my brother was called up during the Vietnam War; and my stepson served in the Army Reserve then Australian Army while his father served in the Navy (HMAS Hobart) during the Vietnam War;

¹ <https://aboutregional.com.au/nelson-blasts-war-memorial-expansion-critics-in-retirement-announcement/>

² <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6833350/war-memorial-rejects-criticism-from-special-interest-groups/>

³ [https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/australian-war-memorial-to-get-\\$500m-renovation/12471580_at_the_3_50](https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/australian-war-memorial-to-get-$500m-renovation/12471580_at_the_3_50). What Dr Sue Wareham (President of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War, Australia) thinks of the Chair’s risible comment we can only imagine.

- While the University Archivist at the University of Melbourne (1998-2008) my responsibilities included the Grainger Museum, a heritage-listed building creatively expanded (advised by Lovell Chen) during 2006-8 without undermining the integrity of the original structure;⁴
- My decade at the Memorial (1978-88), primarily as Senior Curator, Written Records, coincided with the passing of the current Act (1980) and the beginning of a policy addressing space needs with solutions external to the Main Building (the Administrative Building, the Mitchell Annex), a policy which has held for the past forty plus years. During that decade I also produced initial policy advice for an Eternal Flame, worked under three directors (Noel Flanagan, Jim Flemming and Keith Pearson) and published guides to collections including the papers of CEW Bean.

Who is the Memorial for now?

The short answer is and should be “all Australians”. A slightly longer answer would add “including those who have a family connection to a name on the Roll of Honour”. Not anymore. Now, apparently, the AWM is essentially, primarily, for a much narrower section of the community. In recent decades, the AWM Council and senior management have signalled to current and former members of the ADF that, first and foremost, it is for them.

Thus, the opening paragraph of the Development Project webpage states: “The Memorial commemorates our living history”, then adds the priority order: “for every veteran and for every Australian”. Thus, the *Have Your Say* advertisement (CT, 3 July 2020, p 6) stated the project will “ensure the Memorial remains the national centre of commemoration *for all who have served*” [my emphasis]. Thus, the illustrations in the *Our Next Chapter* newsletter: all current serving personnel.

The Memorial’s April 2020 consultation report was just as explicit, mentioning consultation with “200 organisations and their members including ex-service organisations, kindred organisations, veterans’ welfare and defence family groups”. This report also stated (p 3) that “Our values, our character and our identity live on in the stories of past, present, and future service members, their families and community”. It continued, interpreting visitor motives narrowly: “More than one

⁴ See <http://www.lovellchen.com.au/lc/grainger-museum/>

million people visit our Memorial every year to honour these members' service and learn about their experiences in war, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations".⁵

The Memorial's functions do require it, via its definition of "Australian Military History", to include in its focus the history of the ADF and the history of the aftermath of wars and warlike operations through documentation, exhibitions and disseminating information about this history. Even so, the AWM should be, and was intended to be, for all Australians. Aside from the membership of the Council, the 1980 Act made no mention of any particular section of the community, no mention of veterans or ex-servicemen and women, no mention requiring a "therapeutic milieu" for veterans and the ADF.

The Australian people's diversity is not irrelevant here. To take three illustrations.

- By contrast with the emphasis on millions of Australians who have a connection with the Memorial via a family member named on the Roll of Honour (overwhelmingly from the two world wars but also the 1945-1975 conflicts and operations), the current AWM agenda has singled out a tiny proportion of the community for special attention – the current ADF and veterans of post 1999 conflicts and operations. Of course, even this group is extremely diverse – there are veterans of recent conflicts and there are veterans who were *never* involved in "warlike" operations. To the AWM, some Australians are more equal than others, and some veterans too.
- Since 1945 almost 8 million people have migrated to Australia, and almost half the population were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. Each state capital has a different ethnic makeup, but, as the Corona virus second wave outbreak has focused on Melbourne, note that many overseas-born Victorians were refugees from conflicts in Indo-China, the republics of the former Yugoslavia, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan. Newer Australians' understanding of our history, including

⁵ AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION ACT NATIONAL CONSULTATION REPORT, April 2020
<https://www.awm.gov.au/system/files/documents/ATTACHMENT%20S1%20%20%20EPBC%20Act%20National%20Consultation%20Report.pdf>

engagement in wars and related operations, is crucial. Net overseas migration over the past 20 years was between 100,000 and 200,000 p.a. To what extent is the Memorial for these Australians and what did they think of the \$500m expansion plans?

The AWM's June 2020 Preliminary Documentation Submission

None of the arguments for the development are so compelling or convincing that they demonstrate conclusively that *only* the specific development proposed (and no other alternative) *must* be supported. This doesn't matter, of course, as the Prime Minister announced the development as a done deal in November 2018.⁶ The June 2020 retrofitted justification (as presented in June 2020 Preliminary Documentation Submission⁷) is littered with non sequiturs, unsupported claims, and inconsistencies.

- Take for example the assertion that the removal of Anzac Hall “will be one of many alterations the Memorial has made over the 79 years since it opened” (p 30). In relation to the Main Building, at worst, past alterations have meant things like closing the clerestory windows or placing a simple glass link bridge to the current Anzac Hall. To call *the removal* of a building *an alteration* is disingenuous, and to imply it would be all part of a pattern of past work is dishonest. As is the assertion that “The design concept is deferential to, and respectful of, the Main Building consistent with the current Anzac Hall” (p 35). No, it is not.
- A further example is the seemingly uncontentious statement, “it is essential that conflicts subsequent to 1971 are properly commemorated through exhibition. The Project will enable veterans to bring families to the Memorial to explain what they did in these more recent conflicts and humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. The ability for veterans to be able to do this is incredibly important for themselves, their families, and the broader veteran community” (p 69). But this happens now! And commemoration through exhibition can happen and does happen now (including the display of large objects).

⁶ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australian-war-memorial-masterplan-redevelopment>

⁷ <https://www.awm.gov.au/ourcontinuingstory/ourplans/EPBC-prelim-doc>

- Repeatedly in the AWM documentation there is an assumption that more space is needed to display more large objects, *as if otherwise* the stories and service of veterans of post 1999 conflicts and operations and their families somehow won't be adequately acknowledged; *as if otherwise* their mental health won't be adequately managed. Seriously? It is bizarre and open-ended thinking. What does the Memorial do when a RAN veteran – perhaps the donor of the BPC Navy badge⁸ who served with Border Protection Command – asks why it hasn't displayed a Bay class patrol boat? And where is the Memorial's Oberon-class submarine - “reported to have regularly conducted operations with special forces”?⁹ Surely it too would enable Navy veterans to bring their families to the Memorial to explain what they did.
- At the core of the AWM case is the belief that ‘equity’ is “required” by the 1980 Act (p 11), that currently there is inequitable coverage of Australia's military conflicts and operations, that it is not the frontier wars but post 1999 conflicts and operations that are not adequately represented, and that it needs more physical space and more personal stories to remedy this. The people affected by this imbalance are sometimes identified as “servicemen and servicewomen who have served Australia in more recent conflicts and operations” (p 11) and at other times “all Australian servicemen and servicewomen” (p 14). So, which is it?

The significance assessment methodology used by the Memorial to reach this conclusion is not stated but implies Attachment D has the answer. Here metrics such as deaths, total personnel involved and years of conflict are tossed about without recourse to criteria or weighting, and nowhere tied to gallery space or type of collection item. Surely, given the taxpayer dollars involved, we are entitled to something more rigorous?

The current Memorial challenges are not new. On many previous occasions, space pressures for exhibitions collections staff and facilities have been identified and then addressed without undermining the integrity of the primary building, e.g. in 1978 (Mitchell Annex), 1988 (Administration Building), 2001 (Anzac Hall) and 2006 (CEW Bean Building). As well, off-site solutions at Mitchell have been enhanced

⁸ <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1293205>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberon-class_submarine

several times, the grounds in Campbell better exploited (e.g. Sculpture Garden, 1999) and car parking put underground. All sensible.

The minds behind the proposed development of course are aware of this logic – thus, in rationalising the expansion of the Bean Building stating, “The extension, and refurbishment of the existing building, will allow us to consolidate operational and non-critical administrative functions from the main building – optimising the use of space in the main building for gallery content”.¹⁰ Of course, now they don’t plan to stop there.

Conclusion and alternatives

In summary, I am especially opposed to (i) the removal of the current Anzac Hall and (ii) the glazed link to a new Anzac Hall.

The February 2020 Development newsletter stated that the project’s primary purpose is “to provide the space and facilities needed to tell the continuing story of contemporary servicemen and servicewomen who have served in modern conflicts, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations”, and “Sharing the stories of contemporary Australian servicemen and servicewomen is what the project is all about”. It does *not* follow however that there is only one way to do this. There are less expensive, more sensitive ways to achieve these aims. For example:

- Expand the current Anzac Hall (the AWM’s June 2020 submission states at p 75 this is not a technically viable option, then refers the reader back to para 4.5.2 even though here it provides no justification for such an assertion); I find it very hard to believe it is not technically possible to do;
- Reduce earlier wars’ galleries to allow more extensive representation of post 1999 operations if that really is today’s priority, and refocus the travelling exhibition program and online exhibitions accordingly; and
- Establish a major oral history program to record the stories of the current veterans and relevant ADF members, then make edited selections available online and also direct this content into the education and publications programs.

¹⁰ <https://www.awm.gov.au/ourcontinuingstory/ourplans>