

Memorial Rorts: how the Australian War Memorial expansion was rammed through despite public opposition

by David Stephens | Mar 24, 2021 | Government



Illustration: Alex Anstey

“The strongest arguments for the Australian War Memorial have always come from the old white men whose names will appear on foundation stones and for whom these 24,000 square metres of new space will stand as a lasting legacy. And lasting, too, will be the memories of the flawed process that led to this outcome.” **David Stephens** reports on the failure of process and the public opposition which have marred the half a billion dollar AWM.

“Drape ‘Anzac’ over an argument and, like a magic cloak, the argument is sacrosanct,” wrote historian Peter Cochrane in 2015.

Critics of the \$498 million Australian War Memorial expansion fear being seen as disrespecting dead Diggers while proponents know that their emotive euphemisms (“sacrificed” rather than “killed”) and their point-stretching (“the Memorial is a sacred site”) will hit home.

The Anzac cloak has helped ensure that appearances at Senate Estimates by War Memorial staff have often been advertising opportunities drenched in emotion, particularly when Dr Brendan Nelson, former leader of the Liberal Party, was the director.

The Memorial project has passed through four stages of “accountability”, none of which was notable for either rigour or comprehensiveness.

First, there was an internal process within government that culminated in [an announcement by Prime Minister Morrison on 1 November 2018](#) that his government had committed \$498.7 million to the project. The project had progressed outside the normal competitive Budget process: funding arrangements were nailed down secretly, helped by lobbying from then director Nelson and War Memorial Council chairman Kerry Stokes.

[Australian War Memorial: from keeper of the flame to hider of shame?](#)

Stokes also funded the \$700,000 Parliament House shindig to launch the project and gave a personal guarantee to the government that the project would not cost more than \$500 million.

Second was the negotiation between the Memorial and the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (previously Environment and Energy) regarding the heritage implications. The exchange went on for months as the Department tried to extract more information from the Memorial.

Triumph of double-speak

The Department's final statements were a triumph of double-speak, reflecting the path it had to tread between the political reality that the Prime Minister had given the project a tick and the negative effects (particularly the destruction of the award-winning Anzac Hall and changes to the southern entrance of the Memorial) on the heritage status of the Memorial.

Heritage experts in the Department and the Australian Heritage Council, the government's principal advisory body on heritage, came out against aspects of the project. Regardless, [Environment Minister Ley gave the project a tick](#).

Then the parliamentary Public Works Committee looked at the need for and costing of the project. The Committee's rule of thumb for many years has been that if the government says there is a need, then that settles the question. The Committee's report was almost apologetic in tone, setting out in detail the arguments put forward, then admitting at a number of points that the issues being canvassed were beyond its remit.

[The Committee also failed to mention](#) that the number of submissions it received for its inquiry (77) was by far the largest it had ever received on any inquiry since it began work in 1913, with three-quarters against the project.

In fact the strong public opposition to the redevelopment has been apparent at every step, but the views of the public have never really been wanted. Consider the most recent survey, conducted in early February. It included multiple questions but provided no options for participants to write their own views.

For example, to the question: "Which of the following statements best reflects your view of the Australian War Memorial?", the only possible responses were positive, with no space for critical comment.

And now [the National Capital Authority is looking at whether the project is compatible with the National Capital Plan](#). The Plan sets out parameters for development in Canberra, giving special attention to projects in the Parliamentary Triangle, which includes the War Memorial and its environs. The NCA is in a public consultation phase on 'early works' for the project, with input due by 30 April. The aim, according to the application, is 'to adequately prepare the three works sites ... for construction'.

Early works fundamental to expansion

What a misnomer. 'Early works' in fact includes the demolition of the \$20 million (in today's money) award-winning Anzac Hall that is just 20 years old; a massive

excavation at the southern entrance to the Memorial to build a new entrance; and the destruction of between 65 and 100 mature trees in the grounds of the Memorial. Other early works include the erection of fences around the site, temporary paths to facilitate access, and relocating some services. These clearly come under the heading of site preparation.

On the other hand, the new Anzac Hall will be built on the footprint of the demolished Anzac Hall; the construction of a new southern entrance and a new parade ground depends on the excavation of what is there now; the trees have to go to provide construction access or because the ground where they grow now will be covered by extensions to the building.

The destruction of Anzac Hall, the southern excavation, and the tree massacre can in no way be described as early works. They are fundamental to the project. They should not be considered separately and in advance, but along with the rest of the project.

The Memorial project has never been justified. The money could have been better spent on direct benefits to veterans. While no one denies there should be greater recognition of recent service the Memorial could have achieved this by making difficult decisions about the use of its existing space.

The strongest arguments for the project have always come from the old white men whose names will appear on foundation stones and for whom these 24,000 square metres of new space will stand as a lasting legacy. And lasting, too, will be the memories of the flawed process that led to this outcome.

[Manufacturing consent: Australian War Memorial has become a cheerleader for war](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Stephens

David Stephens is editor of the Honest History website and convener of Heritage Guardians, a community committee campaigning against the War Memorial project.