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'Motivated by resentment': verbal grenades in War Memorial heritage battle



Tom McIlroy

Political reporter

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Former Australian War Memorial boss Brendan Nelson has hit out at critics of a planned half-billion-dollar redevelopment, accusing opponents of being "disingenuous" and motivated by resentment.

The Boeing Australia president and former defence minister is the most high profile proponent of plans to increase the historic Canberra memorial's footprint by 80 per cent – a project met with criticism from heritage advocates, historians, veterans' supporters and former directors who argue the memorial's solemnity and history are at risk.

Kerry Stokes and Brendan Nelson secured funding and bipartisan support for the redevelopment.

As federal Parliament's public works committee considers the designs and heritage impact, Dr Nelson has used a private submission to describe evidence from opponents as "misleading at best" and "disingenuous in part", while "largely presented in a vacuum of a willingness to understand the need for, and purpose of, these much needed extensions".

Dr Nelson, who led the memorial until the end of 2019, has championed the expansion and modernisation for five years, supported by Seven West Media boss and memorial chairman Kerry Stokes.

Fellow former directors Brendon Kelson and Steve Gower, as well as heritage advocate David Stephens and groups including the Australian Institute of Architects, are among those concerned about the size and scope of the works.

Some opponents have called for federal dollars allocated to the project to be redirected to veterans' mental health services or national cultural institutions receiving less in funding from the federal government.

"Sadly, the individuals to whom the committee spoke are largely strident critics of the memorial, and me as its [former] director specifically," Dr Nelson wrote.

"Some once worked at the memorial. Both the circumstances of their leaving employment at the memorial and resentment of subsequent changes made to this revered institution, is a significant motivator of criticism aired before the committee and through other fora."

He said claims decisions were made behind closed doors were wrong and rejected suggestions the memorial's governing council was a "men's club" or full of military personnel.

Dr Nelson also said only a handful of 83 eminent Australians who signed an open letter opposing the plan had visited the memorial during his tenure.

He rejected suggestions the expanded exhibition spaces, new entrance and upgraded visitor experiences would stand as "a monument to Brendan Nelson".

"Whilst clearly this is not the case, it reveals the motives of a number of those opposing this project so desperately needed for the 100,000 young veterans our nation has created over the past 20 years."

Last week, Mr Stokes' term as chair was quietly extended for a further 12 months.

Opponents have criticised the addition of new lower section of facade adjacent to the redesigned parade ground, and the demolition of the award-winning Anzac Hall at the building's rear.

Current director Matt Anderson has extended consultation with critics of the plan since taking over in April.

The former diplomat and Royal Australian Engineers troop commander has told MPs the memorial will remain a place of quiet reflection, while honouring the service and sacrifice of Australians who have served and died overseas.

Dr Stephens told *The Australian Financial Review* the former director had engaged in hyperbole.

"I have visited the memorial more than two dozen times in the six and a bit years since Dr Nelson took the job and, from a quick skim through the list of 83 [signatories], I can see many others whose professional work, let alone private interests, would have taken them there also," he said.

Tom McIlroy reports from the federal press gallery at Parliament House. *Connect with Tom on [Twitter](#). Email Tom at thomas.mcilroy@afr.com*