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## ['Australia's haunted house', \*The Monthly\*, February 2021, pp 8-11](#)

Scott Morrison's first press conference in 2021 saw the prime minister in characteristically chipper mode. "Happy New Year, Australia," he boomed, "for we are one and free. Our anthem is about us, who we are, and who we hope to be as well. We are a strong and vibrant liberal democracy. We live in a timeless land of ancient First Nations peoples, and we draw together the stories of more than 300 national ancestries and language groups. How good is Australia?"

It was typical Morrison: a minor policy change touted with blokey enthusiasm and lashings of self-congratulation. In less than a few minutes, he'd managed to spin an editorial tweak to a lacklustre late-19<sup>th</sup>-century patriotic song into a long overdue recognition of the depth of the continent's Indigenous history. The change to the anthem, he had asserted blithely, "adds much" to our national story. But how? Indigenous Australians aren't mentioned. Any hint of their presence is implied at best. Instead, they disappear into "one" Australia, the nation that former prime minister John Howard insisted, should never "make a treaty with itself".

Despite Morrison's fervour for Australia's cultural diversity and Indigenous heritage, his view of Australian history and nationhood – like Tony Abbott's and Howard's before him – is shaped largely by the emotional impact of stories of Australians at war. The very phrase his government changed in the anthem – "for we are young and free" – was, until January 6, the official branding of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), the national institution at the heart of the prime minister's one Australia, which has long been criticised for its failure to incorporate Australia's frontier wars into its representation of Australians' participation in military conflict.

The memorial's branding exercise – an explicit attempt to link the existence of Australia's democratic institutions to the sacrifice of the "fallen" – had been widely promoted on massive billboards at Canberra airport and beyond, and on its website, where "the iconic phrase" appears alongside the AWM logo on a stubbie holder, available at the memorial's gift shop.

But in the months prior to Morrison's superficial change to the national anthem, two announcements – the government's decision to approve the AWM's \$500 million redevelopment, and its response to the release of the Brereton Report into allegations of serious misconduct by Australia's Special Forces in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016 – pointed to a far more profound shift in Australia's national identity.

The Brereton Report, a two-year inquiry delivered on November 19 last year, heard evidence from 423 witnesses (some of whom were interviewed for up to three days). The shock, dismay and sadness of tone are palpable throughout. The report's findings – described as "disgraceful and a profound betrayal of the Australian Defence Force's professional standards and expectations" – were chilling. Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) patrols were accused of shooting prisoners "in order to achieve the soldier's first kill" (a practice that was known as "blooding"), of murdering civilians, of fabricating photographic and documentary evidence, and of enforcing the reign of a "warrior culture" in which "demigod" patrol commanders attempted to "outscore" other patrols in the number of enemy killed. When she finished reading the report, Defence Minister Linda Reynolds felt "physically ill".

No less disconcerting was the military culture the inquiry confronted, one in which “secrecy is at a premium, and in which those who ‘leak’ are anathema”. Investigators encountered considerable “resistance to interrogation”. Some witnesses failed to give “a full and frank account”, either out of “misconceived loyalty to their Regiment, or their mates”. Others feared for their “career prospects” or the possibility of “physical reprisals” if they dared to call out misconduct by peers. Many, it seemed, were “still in denial”.

Within weeks of the report’s release, the predictable cast of shock jocks and conservative pundits railed against AWM director Matt Anderson’s idea of the memorial as “a place of truth”, and his assurance that any war crimes would be acknowledged in full at the memorial. Interviewing Morrison, 2GB’s Ben Fordham righteously claimed that the AWM, thanks to Anderson’s vision of truth, would end up as “a hall of shame”. Independent Senator Jacqui Lambie advocated on behalf of SASR veterans, angered by Defence Force Chief Angus Campbell’s plan to disband the SAS 2 squadron, and to strip all 3000 SASR soldiers who served in Afghanistan of their medals.

In the face of this backlash, Morrison immediately overrode Campbell. No decisions would be made regarding the report’s recommendations, including the payment of compensation to the victims’ families in Afghanistan, Morrison assured, until after special investigator Justice Mark Weinberg had inquired into the 36 matters arising from the report that could potentially result in the criminal prosecution of up to 19 individuals for war crimes.

As for the AWM, Morrison claimed that he had complete confidence that the memorial’s council, chaired by media baron Kerry Stokes and comprising “experienced” and “sensible” people such as former prime minister Tony Abbott, would “exercise appropriate judgement”. Exactly what kind of judgement the council might exercise was already on display. Stokes promised he would establish a “special fund” to assist any members of the SASR whose actions in Afghanistan might see them subjected to legal proceedings. This immediately resulted in calls for his resignation from former AWM director Brendon Kelson and former principal historian Peter Stanley. Not even allegations of war crimes, it seemed, could temper Stokes’ enthusiasm for the boys in uniform.

The Brereton Report, and the questions it inevitably raised about how the nation remembers war, magnified a longstanding tension in the AWM’s constitution. As its founder Charles Bean had always intended, the memorial was exceptional by international standards. Unlike comparable institutions, such as the Imperial War Museum in London or the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, the AWM is “at once museum, archive and shrine”. Given that the memorial has gone down the contentious path of mounting exhibitions on current conflicts such as Afghanistan, the fallout from the Brereton Report will test its commitment to truth-telling like few other inquiries into military misconduct have done.

Already criticised for failing to tell the story of the “dark side of the Anzac legend” (soldiers who committed crimes, rioted, deserted or mutinied) and to adequately address the history of anti-war movements, the AWM stands at a crossroad. Will its council – overwhelmingly dominated by military or former military personnel with little historical expertise, and backed by the prime minister – succeed in restricting the autonomy of the memorial’s curators and historians to tell the full story of what happened in Afghanistan, or any other theatre of war for that matter?

The “warrior culture” of the SASR that the Brereton Report remarked on – “the notion that being designated ‘special’ justified exceptionalism from ordinary rules and oversight” – did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it thrived in a culture that reveres military performance as the highest expression of what it means to be Australian – the sacred cult of Anzac. State sanctioned, largely bipartisan, and propelled by the massive financial and rhetorical investments of conservative governments (and private corporations) since the mid 1990s, it reached its zenith during the Gallipoli centenary in 2015, when it became something of a national creed.

If Australia is “one and free”, we are told, it is because of our soldiers’ sacrifices in overseas wars. As Scott Morrison avowedly believes – following in the footsteps of the AWM’s former director and Liberal Party leader, Brendan Nelson – the memorial houses “the soul of the nation”. If we are shocked by the callous actions of our soldiers in Afghanistan it is partly because our memory of war has become sanitised and myopic. The killing fields have become places of worship. As Nelson told a Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee in 2018, the memorial “is not actually about war”. The “paradox”, he said, “is that it is about love and friendship, love for friends and between friends, love of family, love of our country”.

In the exploits of the Anzacs, we are encouraged to see *our* values and *our* emotions, as if the act of remembering war is merely a vehicle to exhibit our own beneficence. Morrison has claimed that the AWM’s redevelopment will allow it to display more of its collection and *proudly* tell the stories from recent years in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Solomon Islands and East Timor. Remarkably, the new galleries will also showcase Operation Sovereign Borders, as well as feature live crosses to training exercises and current defence activities. Will we see post-match interviews? Reflections on the game? Replays of golden moments? Morrison talks of the AWM’s “simplicity, its restraint, its humility”. Yet, as Nelson and others have argued, the redevelopment his government has so lavishly funded risks turning the memorial into a “theme park”.

Australia is making a conscious choice, the full consequences of which will take decades to appear. Both major parties have supported the \$500 million re-development while the government talks of the need for budgetary restraint in the midst of a global pandemic. This follows the \$100 million provided for the Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux, which was opened by then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2018, and the hundreds of millions spent by the Commonwealth, states and territories over the past decade on the centenary of Gallipoli and World War One. While other major institutions, such as the National Library, National Museum, National Gallery and National Archives, have seen funding cuts, job losses and the reduction of services, the Australian War Memorial behemoth swells to hitherto unimaginable proportions.

The impact of the Commonwealth’s funding decisions over many years has not only seen one part of Australia’s history elevated above all others, it has also witnessed a concerted campaign to establish the AWM as the emotional centre of the nation. “Australians will always be Australian,” Morrison tells us, “so long as they remember this place.”

Yet like so much of the Anzac legend, the prime minister’s beliefs about the AWM’s significance rest on a bed of half-truths and outright falsehoods. Last August, on the eve of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in the Pacific Day, Morrison reflected on the design of Parliament House:

A small secret of this building – from my office to this little cabinet anteroom and through the Cabinet Room and to the marble expanse, which is just on the other side there of the Great Hall and the vestibule – you open all the doors up from here all the way through, you can look straight to the War Memorial. And it was designed that way because as we sit in that cabinet office and I take decisions that we need to take there, [it] is a constant reminder and memory, looking through the Great Hall, of the sacrifice that made all of that possible for us to do that today. And that's as it should be. A line of sight to the 102,000 names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice ...

When Morrison has looked in the opposite direction, from the War Memorial, at the northern end of Walter Burley Griffin's axis, back towards Parliament House, he has claimed that Canberra's founders "ensured that the Australian War Memorial was built in a direct line of sight with the Parliament". Morrison maintained that this was done "to remind every single member that no decision should be taken lightly and that some decisions exact an incalculable cost".

Whichever way Morrison looks, he sees things that were never there. Romaldo Giurgola, the chief architect of Parliament House, knew that its position "at one end of an axis with the War Memorial at the other" connected "the deeds of the past and the deeds of the present". But he had no intention of reminding MPs sitting in the cabinet room of the sacrifice made by Australia's soldiers. Rather, he wanted to draw Griffin's "axis of public space" directly into the parliament itself, and convey "the rich character of the Australian democratic spirit". Similarly, at a meeting of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee on September 7, 1923, attended by Charles Bean, the minutes recorded that the site for the AWM was chosen so that it would be "one of the most prominent objects in the city that could be seen without difficulty". There was no plan to make parliamentarians think of the cost of war every time they passed legislation.

In its determination to create the AWM as Australia's "most sacred place", the place "where we can hear the soul of our country like no other", as Morrison affirmed at the Last Post ceremony held at the memorial in February 2019, the government has narrowed Australia's view of its history and its future horizons.

Rather than placing so much public and emotional investment in the AWM, would the country not benefit more from a national museum that showcased Indigenous cultures and languages and acknowledged the frontier wars? Could Australia speak as much of our democratic and constitutional history as it does of our military history? Could we appoint a governor-general who was not a former general? Could we do more to understand the failure of governments over time to find non-violent means to resolve conflict?

If Australia has a "soul", its address is not Treloar Crescent, Campbell, ACT. It is not fixed and sacred but amorphous and free – and willing, hopefully, to face up to all its history, including its war crimes.

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