

FEBRUARY 27 2021 - 5:25AM

# Let's not allow the Australian War Memorial to become something much uglier

• Sue Wareham

Latest News



The War Memorial risks falling victim to scope creep. Picture: Karleen Minney

The focus of the Australian War Memorial is being transformed from commemoration of our war dead to the promotion of militarism, against the wishes of the Australian people, through processes that act as rubber stamps rather than providing checks and balances.

The immediate issue is the coming partial demolition and expansion of this pre-eminent institution, to make way for large displays of weaponry and for exhibitions of wars that have not even finished. However, the problem runs much deeper than that.

The AWM's corporate plan for 2020-24 states that the institution's purpose is "to commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war or on operational service, *and those who have served our nation in times of conflict*". The words in italics, to include all those who have fought, appear to have been unilaterally tacked on by the AWM Council, disregarding the significant distinction between dying and not dying. They are a stark departure from the relevant words in the 1980 Australian War Memorial Act, which

refers to a national memorial to Australians "who have died on, or as a result of, active service".

One of the major problems with honouring the living and current wars - as well as the dead and past wars - is that of truth-telling. Responding to the release of the Brereton report into alleged war crimes committed by Australian troops in Afghanistan, AWM director Matt Anderson said that the institution is "a place of truth" where the darker parts of Australia's history should be acknowledged. That is an admirable goal. But is Anderson really suggesting that the AWM would tell the unvarnished truth about current wars, even when such truth-telling undermined enthusiasm for the war or the morale of our fighters? On the contrary, exhibitions on current wars are always at risk of simply become propaganda tools, the antithesis of truth-telling.

The AWM's corporate plan also sets out the institution's vision as being "To ensure that their sacrifice is not in vain - We remember them." But what of the situations where Australia's wars *have* been in vain? The vision assumes magical qualities for warfare where there must always be a silver lining.

Whether or not a sacrifice is in vain will be judged by historians (of whom the Australian War Memorial Council has none) and others; it is not for the AWM to arbitrarily determine. The reality of lives lost in vain can be unbearably harsh for those left to grieve. The remedy, however, is not to shape history to our liking, but for our political leaders to honour their responsibility towards our service people - to get right the decisions about going to war. In this, they have grievously failed.

To return to the proposed half-a-billion-dollar expansion. On Monday, the Public Works Committee of Federal Parliament [rubber stamped the project](#), despite the fact that a very strong majority of the large number of submissions were against the project. In a rare turn of events for the committee, there was a dissenting report from ALP members David Smith and Tony Zappia, who objected to the price tag. But on Thursday just one member of parliament, Tasmanian independent Andrew Wilkie, [voted against final approval](#).

Strong public opposition to the redevelopment has been apparent at every step, but in reality the views of the public have never really been wanted. Consent has been manufactured, including by a series of surveys designed to give the desired responses. The most recent, conducted earlier this month, included multiple questions with 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. The redevelopment was taken as a given, despite the lack of all necessary approvals. The priority that will be given to "large military equipment", whether we like it or not, was almost explicit.

The very fact that public "consultation" followed, rather than preceded, the Prime Minister's November 2018 announcement of the extension plans should have been a warning. Contrary views have been marginalised, ridiculed and dismissed. Even the advice of the government's own heritage advisory body, the Australian Heritage Council, that the project should not go ahead, was brushed aside.

#### **READ MORE:**

- [Australian War Memorial project to remove asbestos, lead paint](#)
- [Committee backs \\$500m Australian War Memorial plans but Labor wants Anzac Hall saved and more cost-cutting](#)
- [Heritage council against Anzac Hall demolition for war memorial expansion](#)
- [Andrew Wilkie remains lone soldier against AWM works](#)

This project is lining up with other national scandals where public funds have been treated as the plaything of those in power, in this case mostly military and former military personnel on the AWM Council. But what is at stake is not simply an unconscionably gross overpayment for a plot of airport land, or the allocation of sports grants for political advantage, serious though these transgressions are, but the militarisation of our nation.

Where once we commemorated family members and others who died in Australia's wars, we will now honour all those who fight and have fought: past and present, dead or alive, disabled by their

service or fighting fit. We will gaze in awe at the machinery of warfare, the tanks and fighter planes that will occupy most of the additional 24,000 square metres, and pretend that we understand war better for it.

The Australian War Memorial risks ceasing to be a memorial to our war dead and becoming an honouring of war itself, a rousing endorsement of every political decision to send Australians to war.

The struggle to save the AWM might not be over yet. The Australian Institute of Architects, in a scathing critique of the Public Works Committee decision and the whole process, stated: "How could we stay silent when we know without doubt that this unpopular and inappropriate development will negatively impact one of our nation's most significant monuments?"

But time is running out. The final rubber stamp needed before the bulldozers move in is that of the National Capital Authority. We will see how highly the NCA rates public opinion.

- **Dr Sue Wareham is president of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War.**