

Brendan Nelson, ABC Canberra Local Radio Mornings 10 April 2019, 8:30 am

Interview with Adam Shirley

(Transcript: Steve Flora)

Adam Shirley: Point five degrees, winter is coming. Isn't there a famous show that has that title? Now what's coming is a major expansion of one of the biggest and best known institutions in Australia, let alone Canberra, and I am referring to the Australian War Memorial. Nearly half a billion dollars to expand its footprint, the story it tells and there's been many weeks where people have been supportive of this concept and also critical of it so the Director of the Australian War Memorial Dr. Brendan Nelson will be with us soon to talk about how those plans are shaping up. What sort of responses and feedback the Memorial has been hearing since it announced what it plans to do ...

A.S.: When was the last time you walked into the Australian War Memorial and what made a big impression on you? The solemn recounting of a battlefield in a large 3-D diorama? It could have been the oral recorded histories of diggers in trenches trying to see through one hour after the next? Perhaps the powerful simplicity of the Last Post ceremony. These stories are set to be told on a far grander scale than is currently the case, as you may well have heard. Because last year the War Memorial was provided with four hundred and ninety-eight million dollars to expand its services, its exhibitions, its displays and its physical footprint. Under the plans it will nearly double in its physical size and this plan has received significant reaction for it and against it. Dr. Nelson, Dr. Brendan Nelson is the Director of the Australian War Memorial and has joined us on Mornings. Dr. Nelson, good of you to come by today.

Brendan Nelson: My pleasure, Adam, thank you.

A.S.: What is the feedback that you've been receiving to this point on the plans to expand the Memorial?

B.N.: Well I, I do a number of things apart from managing the Australian War Memorial. I'm a leader of it and I also work as an ambassador for it. I travel the country. So, in the last week I've been in Brisbane and I've been in Adelaide. I have not been stopped by a single person who has expressed anything other than support for what we are seeking to do and admiration for the Australian War Memorial generally. Now, that doesn't mean of course that there aren't people opposed to it and if you read our local paper, the *Canberra Times*, you'd certainly think that there is significant overwhelming opposition to it, but my experience of it is that is, that is not the case.

So, of course I respect people who don't support what we are seeking to do, but as I said on the first of November last year in the Great Hall of the Parliament, when we revealed our plans, what's important first is the why. Why are we doing this? And the reason we are doing it, we identified, I identified in my very first week, and that is since 1999 this nation has created a 100 000 young veterans, plus their families and yet all we had when I arrived the week before Christmas in 2012 in relation to these contemporary conflicts was a long-range patrol vehicle used by the SAS in 2005.

We have used every access corridor, we have used every storage facility, every space we can find to tell the story of what these young Australians have done in the last twenty years. This nation has contributed to 65 peace-keeping operations, 40 000 Australians, young Australians have served in them. What they did in Rwanda, Somalia and Cambodia was much more difficult for them than

many on active operational service in warlike operations, and yet the floor space, the space dedicated to that is embarrassingly underdone, less than a standard 7-11, smaller than the Prime Minister's office.

You look at what we've done in Afghanistan over 15 years and if you add to that the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Iraq, it is less than two percent of our exhibition space. Our nation, up until 2014, (unintelligible) even more now, according to ASPI, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said that we had spent more than twenty billion dollars sending these young Australians overseas. We spent in that period of time four hundred billion dollars equipping them, we, we're spending over a decade, we'll spend a hundred billion on veterans and supporting them, as we should.

We have a responsibility to tell their stories, so that's what we're doing, there'll also be a quiet space for reflection and emotion to be released and there will also be modernisation of access for people with disabilities, wayfinding for visitors ... It is not about more First World War guns. We're going to do a little bit more on the bombing of Darwin, the Catalinas in the Second World War, the Battle of Coral and Balmoral in Vietnam, but this is almost all for these young men and women of the last thirty to forty years.

A.S.: So since the plans were announced in November of last year as you say, which groups of people have been seeking responses, reactions, feedback from?

B.N.: Well, basically, as a part of the development of the detailed business case last year from the second of August to the 26th of September, we ran forums in Canberra, in Sydney, in Brisbane, Townsville, Darwin, we set up a dedicated website, a dedicated email address. I personally, personally wrote to 125 individuals and organisations - including the National Institute of Architects I might add - to seek their views, their input, setting out the five broad areas for consultation. We wanted to know what people thought, and we received, in fact at one of the Canberra public forums only one person arrived, Warwick Costin, who was very impressed with the service that he received. Since that period of time, since closing the public consultation, I've had in the order of less than twenty emails or letters from people critical of what we're doing, in some cases virulently, strongly so, in others not really quite understanding why we are doing what we are. So, in terms of reaching out, as I say, I'm travelling all the time, I'm speaking about what we're doing, I'm here talking to you today, Adam, but we're well advanced.

A.S.: Since the understanding's becoming broader of exactly what it's for and how big it will be, how would you gauge veterans, current servicemen and women's response to it? Supportive of the current plan, concerns, critical outright? Just give us a gauge of that now that it's been, four to five months.

B.N.: Generally speaking supportive, so, the RSL, Soldier On for example, to, obviously the R.S.L. is the peak group, Soldier On, a group looking after 2700 veterans and their families, young ones in particular, Mates for Mates, Commando Welfare Trust, a whole variety of these veterans groups are either supportive or sanguine about it. You do get some veterans who will say, well, five hundred million dollars over ten years, they would rather see that spent directly on veterans services, precisely the debate that Charles Bean had to deal with in the 1920s after the First World War. John Monash had to deal with it in relation to the Shrine of Remembrance.

It is not a case of one or the other, and the argument that I put, I don't have to put it to the veterans so much, I put it to the broader community, is that these young men and women, they need to have their stories told, and when we were launching the latest volume of the official peacekeeping history two weeks ago, I made the point that the five key contributors to post-traumatic stress, of them, one

of them is meaninglessness. So, the sense of what you did doesn't count. Your country is not proud of what you did, that people don't know or understand what you did, and there's Kev Ryan who served in Namibia in 1988 said, he said, 'It's as if we never were'. And so, a part of it, one Vietnam veteran said to me after the announcement was made, he said I regard the Australian War Memorial as being part of veterans' welfare. So, this is how, cause what some of people are saying, including these intellectuals and academics and retired public servants who recently published their letter, what they're basically saying is look, just close up shop, no more expansion, let's just stop at what we've already got in the Australian War Memorial, as if nothing is, has happened in the last twenty years that needs to be told ...

A.S.: Do you think that's a fair assessment that they're saying just close up shop? I mean there's significant debate about the size and the expansion, let's say the proportion of what's taken up, but as opposed to not doing anything more, is that really a sentiment you're getting?

B.N.: It seems to be the case, perhaps, look it's not my case to try and psychologically understand what their motives are, and there's enough in life of people imputing to others a motive they might have for themselves, but, , they're certainly opposing the expansion of the Australian War Memorial and I, a part of what I've said to at least a couple of them who attended a event at the Memorial recently, by the way, by the way of the eighty-three there's only three I've seen at the Memorial in six and a half years, but as I said to them, part of what we've intending to do as a permanent display is to tell the story of what this country does to actually stop war in the first place.

What do we actually do particularly in our diplomatic space? We'll open an exhibition, temporary exhibition, in October this year called Courage for Peace and we're going to tell the story, it'll only be for twelve months, but we're going to tell the story about what our country does to actually stop war in the first place.

And the other thing that I discovered is that this place, the Australian War Memorial, look it's many things, but it's a part of what I call the therapeutic milieu for these men and women coming back to a country that has no idea, no idea what they've done, but they can barely explain it to their families let alone the rest of the country ...

A.S.: And you see your role and its role to channel that, to actually explain that for them or at least assist them to do so?

B.N.: It most certainly is, and one of the criticisms put by the intellectuals recently was that, since when has the Australian War Memorial had a role in veterans' welfare? My argument is that it always has, but as many of your listeners know I'm a medical graduate, a former president of the Australian Medical Association, and one of the things, I guess, I look at life, and I look at people and their behaviour, if you like, often from a medical perspective. Within two or three months of arriving at the Australian War Memorial, I realized what was happening, all of this emotion was being revealed, not a single place, not a single place in the War Memorial can you take someone for their breakdown. We have them breaking down in the galleries. We have them breaking down in the Roll of Honour. I'm patron of Lifeline, I've put all of the staff through the accidental counselling program, which we continue to do, but we need a space and that's part of what's driving the need to expand. And, I've got, we haven't got time to do it, but I, I can read you social media postings from young veterans that have visited the Australian War Memorial and what seeing albeit our modest Afghanistan exhibition means to them.

And I say to the critics, whom I know are listening, on the fourteenth of August 2013, I had to drop my suit into the dry cleaners down in Kingston. Now the reason I had to do that was because the

following, the preceding day, night we had officially opened our small Afghanistan exhibition of which I'm proud. Mrs. Pam Palmer, whose son, Scott, was killed in the Blackhawk crash in Kandahar in 2010, she and I were standing in front of the cowling from that helicopter which was used to bring out our three dead and our wounded from that helicopter. She buried her face in my shoulder, against my neck, wrapping her arms around me and the tears took her makeup into my, onto my shoulder as she said, 'Thank you for making my son's memory live, and what he had done worthwhile'.

Now that is what it means, and these people that are arguing, they're saying, 'Oh you can't have big things displayed at the War Memorial'. Apparently, a Gallipoli landing boat is alright, or a Zero fighter, or a Lancaster bomber, or a Iroquois helicopter from Vietnam, but if we put in an Aslav or a Bushmaster from recent operations, or we (unintelligible) big things salvaged from Tobruk, Tobruk or Sydney Four, in some way we shouldn't do that to these young ones.

As Rear Admiral Ken Doolan said to me in my first year, 2013, standing in front of the bridge of HMAS *Brisbane*, you and I, Adam, as civilians look at it and think. 'Oh well, it's off a big ship', from our first guided missile destroyer, very emotionally he said to me, 'When I look at that, it all comes back. My life at sea, commanding that ship, my responsibilities to get those young sailors home, the men and women I worked with, the sacrifices made by my family.' And on the 24th of April, the day before ANZAC Day this year, a group of Australian from HMAS Stuart will get access to our storage facilities so they can see a Seahawk helicopter in which they served and from which one of them was awarded the Medal of Gallantry. That's what these things mean to us.

A.S.: Dr. Brendan Nelson is the Director of the Australian War Memorial, he's our guest on Mornings at twenty-three past nine, Adam Shirley with you. You mentioned some of the recent journeys you've taken to other cities, to gauge response and reaction to the expansion plans, some have suggested that a way to deliver this mission, to raise this awareness, is to take a series of different sites and make them ports where you can set up some of the War Memorial's well, stock, and allow other cities to contain it rather than have it all concentrated here. What is your response to that suggestion?

B.N.: Adam, two things. Firstly when I arrived, I guess from Mars, as you know I had no professional background in being a museum director, I said to our staff, who love our artefacts, relics, they care for them in, in fact I think better than they care for their own personal belongings, I said to them 'They do not belong to us, they belong to the nation from which they have come, and to the extent that we possibly can, I want every art work, every artefact, every relic out there'. So, throughout the country, at the ANZAC centre in Albany, much of what's on display is from the Australian War Memorial. The Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, which to its immense credit has created a museum, is filled with our artefacts and relics ...

A.S.: So there's already quite a bit of, what, the overall groupings and the displays that are out there ...

B.N.: Right throughout Australia, so at the moment our Act, certainly our budget, does not allow us to set up satellite facilities. I've just received a letter from a group of people in Toowoomba that want us to set up something there. So, if the government changed our Act and funded us to do so, yes, of course.

Now, coming back, the more important point is the architects, at least some of them who are up in arms about the plan to demolish ANZAC Hall and rebuild it, deeper, wider, broader and so on, they said, one of them said, 'Why can't you just build more buildings on the grounds of the War

Memorial?' The point is, and this is what differentiates the Australian War Memorial from all the other cultural institutions, the heart of this memorial is a man who is buried, an unknown Australian soldier. And then cloaking the cloisters of the commemorative area, the Shrine, are the names of 102 800 men and women killed in war, peacekeeping, humanitarian disaster relief operations, in order for the War Memorial to discharge its responsibilities which are to commemorate, to allow, to nurture reflection, to deliver an understanding, there has to be a connection to the heart of the Memorial. So once we start putting an Australian War Memorial facility whether it's separate from the Memorial on our grounds, or whether it's in a distant part of the country, it becomes a museum only and not a commemorative space (unintelligible).

A.S.: You mention ANZAC Hall, there has been concern raised about it's demolition under these plans including from the head of the Australian Institute of Architects, is a possibility that plan to demolish it will be reviewed or modified?

B.N.: Well that's unlikely. We went through a very detailed, we had an initial business case then we did a detailed business case, we started with a use of requirements brief and then we ended up with a 1500 page document, we looked at every possibility that there might be, in fact in the early days ...

A.S.: To retain it you mean?

B.N.: To, no to basically, what we need to do, Adam, is, how can we expand the exhibition space at the Memorial for, with the amount of space that will be needed over the next 30, 40, 50 years and how can we do with best value for money in the shortest space of time possible without threatening the integrity of the heritage building?

Now, in the process of working through all of the options, it came down to four options, and the architects who were working with the consultants on the details of the business case said the highest value land you've got and the most cost effective way to reduce complexity of the project is to demolish ANZAC Hall and then to rebuild it. I just emphasize to your listeners, ANZAC Hall will be rebuilt. It will be deeper, wider, it'll be on two levels. It currently has 4,796 square meters of exhibition space. It will go to 12,629. It will have an atrium in the centre, so you'll actually be able to look back to the dome above the Hall of Memory in which the Unknown Australian Soldier is interred. And like the British Museum, you'll have an atrium that connects the new ANZAC Hall to the rear of the existing building.

The problem goes back to the late eighties, when the Memorial had five designs whittled down to three for a northern hall which would become ANZAC Hall. Two of the designs that were looked at the time were modular; they allowed for stage development and future expansion. The design they chose does not allow for future development and expansion and its contours make it, it, you can't expand it. However, the architects who are submitting for the design competition, if they wish to submit a design, which will deliver the capability and the space that we need which doesn't include knocking down ANZAC Hall, they are perfectly free to do so.

A.S.: So that option is still open depending on who wins that design competition?

B.N.: Yes.

A.S.: A couple of quick ones. Ah, is there any scope to change or modify the overall expansion project depending upon ongoing feedback you get?

B.N.: Well, a part of the process is of course getting feedback, and all of the, whether it's the quantity surveyors on the cost, whether it's the engineers, whether it's the architects that are

involved and the various people with professional expertise who come in who want to change various parts of it, if it makes sense, if it stays within the budget and its going to deliver the better outcomes that we are looking for our nation and the veterans and their families, of course we are open to it. I mean, ah, you can't you can't reasonably expect that some things aren't going to change or be modified on the way through, but what's critically important is that we get the extra 6000 square metres of exhibition space, that's about a sixty percent increase on what's currently in the Memorial. And the additional spaces that we need for visitors, as I say in terms of private spaces, wayfinding, disabled access and all of those things.

A.S.: And when do you anticipate first phase of construction begins?

B.N.: Well, we would, we're planning and hoping to have the early works construction, that's the contractors' facilities and the parking for tradespeople and so on to be done at the end of this year. The very first element will be the major construction that people will see will be in the final quarter of next year, the demolition of ANZAC Hall and there are basically five works, so we're going to get an integrated package of works that are here, you'll have a rebuild of ANZAC Hall as I've described, you will have an extension to the Bean Building, behind Poppy's on the eastern side of the Memorial, you'll have a new underground entrance and southern entrance hall at the front of the Memorial and you'll have a new research centre which will be an extension of Poppy's and a redevelopment inside the original building. So, where there is, for those familiar with it, where the research centre is, behind the tiny Afghanistan exhibition, that'll all be moved out and relocated into the new building and all of that will be redeveloped into new exhibition space.

A.S.: We'll look to the steps in this big project, a high profile one and one that obviously has a lot of work being put into it. Dr. Brendan Nelson, thanks for coming in and updating us on Mornings today.

B.N.: Thank you, Adam, and I'm happy to do so regularly.