

'Shameful': ex-directors oppose War Memorial redevelopment



Tom McIlroy *Political reporter*

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Former bosses of the Australian War Memorial will ask Parliament to block plans for a \$500 million redevelopment of the historic site, warning its dignity is at risk of being overwhelmed.

Brendon Kelson and Steve Gower are among opponents of plans to increase the memorial's footprint by 80 per cent, with the former directors set to tell a parliamentary committee the federal funding allocated to the project should be redirected to veterans' services and other cultural institutions.

"This is a tribute to those who have died in war and it's an institution dedicated to their commemoration," Mr Kelson told *The Australian Financial Review* ahead of Tuesday's hearing of the public works committee.



An artist's impression of the expanded of Australian War Memorial. **Supplied**

"It is not a military museum. It is not a repository for stuff the Department of Defence is offloading. These are the kind of things you'd find in a military museum or a theme park. They're toys for the boys.

"The people advocating for this show themselves to be shamefully inadequate in explaining what the memorial stands for and its place in our history."

Mr Kelson, who led the memorial from 1990 to 1994, said large military objects should be held and displayed at a second site in Canberra's north.



Former director Brendon Kelson will give evidence at Tuesday's hearing. **Sitthixay Dithavong**

"The memorial will be overwhelmed by this development. It is trying to squeeze things into a limited space."

Former senior public servants, heritage advocates and the Australian Institute of Architects have expressed concern about the plan, launched under former boss Brendan Nelson and supported by both the Coalition and Labor.

Memorial chair and media boss Kerry Stokes is a vocal supporter. Representatives of the memorial will give evidence at the hearing.

Steve Gower, director from 1996 until 2012, said the memorial's significance was like that of the Sydney Opera House.

"They seem to have almost wantonly ignored heritage matters. It's an extraordinary building and probably one of Australia's most recognised structures, in its symbolism and its form and environment," he said.

"A lot of the redevelopment includes knocking down an award-winning building, replacing it with another building with a roof line that will protrude over the main building, and will be seen from Parliament House.

"That's a very important sight line. It should never be interfered with."

He said a new entrance, changes to the front vista and live streaming of current defence operations overseas were unnecessary.

"It is a place of reverence. You leave very pensive and mindful of the loss. It's a very sombre place."

Canberra historian David Stephens said the memorial had conducted a haphazard, deceptive, and careless consultation process.

"Much of the argument supporting the project has been based on emotive anecdote, rather than evidence.

"Rather than seeking more and more space, the Memorial should manage within its existing space – and make hard decisions about how to use it. All cultural institutions the world over must do that."

He called for the \$498 million in funding to instead go to support veterans and their families, including for mental health and homelessness support.

"Disproportionate spending on the memorial compared with other cultural institutions – the National Gallery, the National Museum, the National Library, the National Archives – inevitably skews the presentation of our history to favour military exploits."

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