

Australian War Memorial must formally address frontier violence

By The Canberra Times

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It was somewhat reassuring to hear the [director of the Australian War Memorial directly address the frontier wars](#) in an interview last week.

But while Matt Anderson - who took the helm in 2020 - went some way to explaining the memorial's position on the matter, he still defended the fact it doesn't acknowledge those who died on Australian soil while defending their land.

Anderson maintains the memorial does, in fact, recognise the Indigenous struggle via its collections, its storytelling and the fact it has Indigenous consultants on staff or at the ready to advise on these issues.

"For now, we do acknowledge it. I'm advised and informed regularly by my Indigenous liaison officers and veterans, and I continue to listen to them," he said.

It's the "for now" that holds multitudes, though.

Anderson's predecessor Brendan Nelson was adamant that the memorial was not the place to commemorate frontier violence, that institutions such as the National Museum of Australia would do it better.

He also maintained, repeatedly, that including conflicts between Indigenous Australians and white settlers remained off the agenda.

Anderson, on the other hand, has taken a more nuanced approach, while still pointing to the memorial's charter.

His take is that, given what the memorial was intended to represent, conflicts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people do not fit in with its overall narrative.

Perhaps it's time, then, to change the narrative, to alter the memorial's charter in a way that reflects our much-changed perceptions and attitudes towards Australia's difficult history.

Given Anderson also focused, in his interview, on the vast amount of extra space the planned expansions will bring to the memorial, surely there is room there to accommodate this history.

The War Memorial is one of Australia's - and Canberra's - most prominent institutions, and is often a touchstone for cultural debates about history, commemoration and Australian identity.

And it's clear this is an issue that will not go away any time soon.

During the consultation process around the expansion project, the push for frontier violence to be commemorated alongside other wars was the most consistent topic of feedback.

Back in 2019, Nelson may have questioned such feedback in the context of mainstream opinion, but *The Canberra Times* published another letter about this issue just two weeks ago.

"The time has come for the AWM to also recognise that the British occupation of Australia was not a peaceful settlement but a brutal campaign," the letter said.

Anderson would reply that the memorial does acknowledge it, but only within a particular frame of reference.

But with \$500 million to spend, the frame could expand, even a little.

The memorial would have little to lose from widening its charter to include this facet of history, and it would be taking nothing away from its sister institution over the lake, which has a mandate to tell Australia's stories as fully as possible.

Anderson has been in the role for two years now, and he has the chance to open up this issue for serious debate, rather than abiding by the words of his predecessors.

"I continue to ensure that I remain true to the memorial's purpose while acknowledging the fact of frontier violence," he said last week.

There is space - much more space - for him to do both.