

## Frontier Wars retreat at the War Memorial

This document follows the history of the Australian War Memorial's approach to the Australian Frontier Wars. It covers the period September 2022 to August 2023. The material was collected on the Honest History website ([honesthistory.net.au](http://honesthistory.net.au)). Most of it originally appeared in the mainstream media or was our analysis of Senate Estimates hearings.

[Our first post on 29 September](#) noted the encouraging remarks of then Memorial Council Chair, Brendan Nelson (the Council had decided the Memorial would provide a much broader, much deeper depiction of the Frontier Wars) and the follow-up from others, including scepticism from Council member and RSL national president, Major General Greg Melick. We suggested all should wait and see what came next. [Our analysis of later media reports](#) encouraged us to remain cautious. [More of the same](#).

[The Memorial missed an opportunity at Senate Estimates in November](#) to provide some clarity. Meanwhile, Chair Nelson was packing his bags for London and a new job with Boeing, and new Chair, Kim Beazley, was preparing to take up the baton.

Henry Reynolds and Rachel Perkins, long-time advocates of change at the Memorial, [tried to sound hopeful](#). Honest History, however, [was more sceptical](#) on the basis of close analysis of what the Memorial had said at Estimates and since. Early in December, we started to say [the Memorial was 'running away' from the Frontier Wars](#), even as Mr Beazley made his first tentative remarks as Chair. [More analysis of November Estimates](#).

We tracked [Mr Beazley's successive media appearances](#), as he gradually refined his position and moved to support for the Memorial giving 'substantial' coverage to the Frontier Wars and giving Indigenous people 'the dignity of resistance'. [More of the same](#). We pointed out that the Chair now had the task of bringing others along with him – apart from people like us, who supported him.

[The Chair kept talking. And again.](#)

The question remained, though, [what did 'substantial' mean](#), particularly as there was ample evidence that [Memorial management was not singing from the same sheet as the Chair](#)? Indeed, Memorial management admitted that it expected to devote very little more space to the Frontier Wars after the redevelopment than it had before, and that space would, as before, be shared with four late 19<sup>th</sup> century military expeditions in support of Queen Victoria.

[February Senate Estimates provided no further clues. Chair Beazley kept talking.](#)

Early in May, in an answer to a Senator's question, Memorial management [doubled down on the minimal change scenario](#): the area to be devoted to the Frontier Wars would be 410 square metres in the post redevelopment Memorial and this area would be shared with displays on other 'pre-1914' conflicts, meaning the contingents that went to the New Zealand Wars, the Sudan, the Boxer Rebellion and the Boer War. The co-location was just as it had been in the 'old' Memorial, the amount of space was just 25 square metres greater.

Four weeks later, at [May Senate Estimates](#), Memorial management stuck to its guns, amid accusations that its Frontier Wars evidence to previous Estimates had been misleading – or at least showed a lack of awareness of history and of the briefings it had received from its

own historians. This Estimates hearing was uncomfortable, even by the high standards of that venue.

A hint of the reasons for this embarrassing situation emerged in [a media report of a difference of view](#) between Chair Beazley and the Council's September decision, on the one hand, and Major General Melick of the Council and the RSL, on the other. [We had already written about the 'credibility gap'](#) at the Memorial on the Frontier Wars; it now seemed to be personified as Beazley vs Melick. [More on this aspect](#).

[The Major General argued](#) the Memorial should stick to portraying uniformed soldiers, like those who went to New Zealand, the Sudan, China, and South Africa from 1860 to 1900 to defend Queen Victoria's Empire. The Chair presumably maintained the line he had been pursuing for the first months of the year (giving non-uniformed Indigenous warriors 'the dignity of resistance'), although by August he was less inclined to say so publicly. ([The judgement in early June in the Roberts-Smith case](#) created a separate set of – presumably time-consuming – problems for the Memorial and its Council.)

Honest History and the members of the new Defending Country Memorial Project Inc. [thought Beazley should ask Melick to resign](#). We told Beazley – and the Minister – just this and [Beazley replied with an unsigned letter](#) saying that what mattered was Council decisions; individual Council members were free to spruik their own views. Honest History thought this could lead to awkward situations, with [potentially all 13 Council members having licence to freelance](#).

*Last updated 14 August 2023*