

HONEST HISTORY

20 April 2023

The Hon. Linda Burney MP
Minister for Indigenous Australians
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

We are writing to draw your attention to a credibility gap between the statements of the Hon. Kim Beazley AC, Chair of the Council of the Australian War Memorial, about how the Memorial will recognise and commemorate the Australian Frontier Wars and, on the other hand, what is actually happening at the Memorial. Our recent research on this issue can be reached through [our media release](#).

Mr Beazley has emphasised that First Nations people must be given 'the dignity of resistance'. This is appropriate. Mr Beazley, however, has also called for 'substantial' recognition and commemoration of the Frontier Wars at the Memorial. Commentators have pointed out that the word 'substantial' is very much open to interpretation.

In any case, statements from Memorial management show that the Memorial's plans at present diverge only marginally from how it operated prior to the current redevelopment. The proposed 'pre-1914' gallery is to cover just 408 square metres, only 23 square metres more than in the pre-redevelopment Memorial, and the Frontier Wars are to share this space with the expeditions to the New Zealand wars, the Sudan, the Boxer Rebellion and the Boer War.

These plans are ludicrous. They are also demeaning of First Nations people and of the number of deaths that occurred during the Frontier Wars which, on some estimates, match the number of deaths of Australians serving in uniform in all our wars overseas.

We have proposed an Action Plan:


- amend the *Australian War Memorial Act 1980* to explicitly require the Memorial to deal with the Frontier Wars (rather than leave the Memorial to interpret the current Act);
- delay allocating space for the Frontier Wars until decisions have been made about gallery content;
- provide a designated Frontier Wars gallery rather than co-locating the Frontier Wars with colonial expeditionary forces;
- consult a wide range of historians (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and Indigenous people (not just the Memorial's narrowly based Indigenous Advisory Group); and
- develop the theme of 'Defending Country', which is applicable both to First Nations people defending Country *on* their Country and uniformed Australian service people sent overseas to fight.

We urge you to encourage the War Memorial Council to get this plan under way.

We understand that gaining public support for the Voice has to be the current priority for government, but without action soon, proper recognition and commemoration of the Frontier Wars - an essential part of the Truth-telling that has to accompany and follow the Voice - will be irrevocably compromised by stealthily taken decisions of architects and builders and Memorial management.

We are writing in similar terms to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. We have copied this letter to Assistant Minister McCarthy.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Stephens".

Dr David Stephens

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Stanley".

Professor Peter Stanley

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Noel Turnbull".

Noel Turnbull

[Dr David Stephens](#) is Editor of [the Honest History website](#), Convener of [Heritage Guardians](#), and co-editor with Alison Broinowski of [The Honest History Book](#) (2017).

[Professor Peter Stanley](#) is an Honorary Professor at UNSW Canberra and author of more than 30 books on military and social history. He was Principal Historian at the Australian War Memorial and then inaugural head of the Research Centre at the National Museum of Australia.

[Noel Turnbull](#) is a Vietnam veteran with a 50-year career in public relations, politics, journalism, and academia. He has been a member or Chair of many public bodies and developed [the Truth and Integrity Project](#).

Contact: David Stephens

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