

MEDIA RELEASE

Government needs to take responsibility for how we commemorate war service

The release of the Brereton report shows that the Afghanistan tragedy is not just about rogue soldiers, but about the governments that deploy them.

Governments bear heavy responsibility when they take countries into wars. That responsibility extends to how our military commitments – and their consequences – are remembered and commemorated.

Heritage Guardians releases today the text of a letter to the Prime Minister, complaining that he has devolved to the current Director of the War Memorial, Matt Anderson, the responsibility of defending the government's commitment of \$498m to a redevelopment of the Memorial.

Mr Anderson was responding [to an open letter to the Prime Minister, signed by more than 70 Australians](#), opposing the Memorial redevelopment.

'In recent years, the Memorial has been run largely at arms' length from government, the parliament, and the people. This has helped it to promote a simplistic image of war as "service and sacrifice" by "heroes"', Heritage Guardians said.

'Dr Brendan Nelson, as Director of the Memorial, even described the Afghanistan probe as an attempt to tear down our heroes. Brereton has shown us that the picture is more complex than that.'

'The Prime Minister needs to ensure that the War Memorial of the future reflects this complexity, and he could start this process by answering his correspondence and not leaving it to Mr Anderson.'

The chairman of the War Memorial Council, Kerry Stokes, and the Memorial's then Director, Dr Nelson, lobbied intensively for the Memorial redevelopment. They also provided strong support for Ben Roberts-Smith VC, Mr Stokes' employee, Dr Nelson's close friend, and a central figure in the Afghanistan story.

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21 November 2020

TEXT OF THE HERITAGE GUARDIANS LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER

The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

I refer to [the letter to me of 5 November 2020](#), signed by Mr Matt Anderson, PSM, Director of the Australian War Memorial. Mr Anderson was replying to [an open letter of 22 October to you as Prime Minister](#).

I was the contact officer for the open letter, which had more than 70 signatories, including Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), Paul Barratt (former Secretary of the Department of Defence), Richard Butler (former diplomat), Paul Daley (author and journalist), Elizabeth Evatt (first Chief Justice of the Family Court), Steve Gower and Brendon Kelson (former Directors of the War Memorial), Carmen Lawrence (former Premier of Western Australia, federal Minister, and Chair of the Australian Heritage Council), John Menadue (former Secretary of your Department and others), Don Watson (author), architects, historians, former diplomats, and former officers of the Memorial.

Mr Anderson said the letter had been referred to him because he has responsibility for this matter. Mr Anderson is wrong about where responsibility lies. You, Prime Minister, are responsible, even more than the responsible Minister.

The open letter was addressed to you not only because of the significance of the matter, but because of your *close personal involvement* in this project from the beginning. According to the then Director of the Memorial, Dr Nelson, you as Treasurer received the personal guarantee of the Chairman of the Memorial Council, Mr Stokes, that the cost of the Memorial project to the government would not exceed \$500m. Then, as Prime Minister, you announced the \$498m funding commitment (November 2018), unveiled the plans, and opened the ‘pop-up’ exhibition (November 2019).

By your own account in November 2018, you and the government had been personally and intensively lobbied by Mr Stokes and Dr Nelson (‘Kerry and Brendan’) to support the project. By contrast, consultation with the public at large has been conducted in an atmosphere that the project is a ‘done deal’, in advance of necessary approvals under the EPBC Act, from the Public

Works Committee, and from the National Capital Authority. This consultation, furthermore, has been reported by the Memorial in ways that have been misleading both as to the degree of public support the project has received and the degree to which the Memorial has amended its plans in response to (belated) public comment.

In view of your personal involvement, it is quite inappropriate – and an affront to the signatories of the letter – that you have offloaded the reply task to the chief executive of the proponent institution, which benefits from the project and which has presided over the deeply flawed process to this point. Clearly, there should be separation between the proponent of a development and the consent agency (DAWE) and its Minister. It is *bizarre* that the proponent of a heritage project still to be finally approved is responding on behalf of the government.

Mr Anderson claims in his letter that ‘the Memorial has acknowledged, and responded to, the concerns raised by the Australian Heritage Council’ and that the Memorial’s *Final Preliminary Documentation* contains ‘substantial’ changes to the plans. In fact, the changes are *not* substantial and *do not* address the serious concerns of the Heritage Council and others.

The protection of national heritage should be a key task of our nation’s Prime Minister. In heritage terms, the Memorial is on a par with the Sydney Opera House, the Great Barrier Reef, Uluru, and the old and new Parliament Houses in Canberra. The project as it stands seriously threatens the heritage values of the Memorial, as was recognised by the Heritage Council as the government’s principal adviser on heritage matters.

The open letter should have received your personal attention and the reply should have carried your signature. Again, on behalf of signatories of the open letter and of the many, many Australians who have serious misgivings about this project, I request a response from you.

Yours faithfully

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

(Dr) David Stephens

Convener, [Heritage Guardians](#)

20 November 2020

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