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COMMENTARY

Never Enough: the Australian War Memorial Redevelopment

NICHOLAS BROWN 

You can do a lot with \$500 million. In November 2018 Labor's National Conference pledged \$500 million to measures to address international refugee pressures – an expensive way, critics suggested, of avoiding division on the conference floor. Three months earlier, \$500 million was the projected cost of Project Jetstream, the digital infrastructure Chairman Justin Milne envisaged superseding broadcasting just prior to the implosion of the corporation's senior leadership – and, again, critics wondered if Milne's vision of a huge database into which 'we will pour audio video assets, complete shows, rushes, news footage, news segments and archival footage' was, fundamentally, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's national mission.¹ And in April \$500 million was the 'game-changer' figure to address the threat of climate change to the Great Barrier Reef, much of which was bestowed on a private charity. That last element also remains controversial: if it wins the May 2019 election, Labor vows to 'claw back' the money.

Five hundred million dollars, it seems, fits the role of big political gesture; it frames emerging models of government, social needs and public expectations; it tests thresholds of accountability. That sum is also the budget allocated to a major, seven-year program of redevelopment for the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra, confirmed in November 2018.

There was, unlike some of these examples, no surprise about the AWM's bid, and nor, said the memorial's director, Brendan Nelson, any 'apology' for it.² The AWM's case, and its cost, had been refined over several years as part of the memorial's commitment to 'remain relevant to all Australians' (the actual plans, which propose demolishing an award-winning extension completed in 2001, were more of a shock).³ Yet the November announcement enabled Nelson to build on the profile of the fourth Invictus Games, held in Sydney the previous month, for extra flourish. However rhetorical, that link indicates one of the significant ways in which that national 'relevance' is now defined.

With great publicity, the 'wounded, injured and ill former or currently serving defence personnel' from eighteen nations participated in those games, 'using the healing power of sport to recover, rehabilitate and overcome'. In the closing

¹ 'ABC Pushes for Massive Digital Grant', *Australian*, 23 July 2018.

² Brendan Nelson "Completely Unapologetic" about Size of AWM Funding', *Canberra Times*, 1 November 2018.

³ Chairman's Address, *Annual Report 2017–2018*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 2018, 2.

ceremony, the Duke of Sussex spoke of competitors as ‘ordinary people’ who could help us all ‘to identify something in your own life you want to change’.⁴

Nelson was more specific. Upgrading the AWM would particularly honour the ‘Invictus generation’ of Australians who had served in recent conflicts: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Solomon Islands and East Timor.⁵ It would ensure the same would be done for those involved in conflicts to come. If William Henley’s poem, ‘Invictus’, published in 1888 and expressing the author’s struggle with complications from tuberculosis, had morphed into a tribute to those dealing with casualties in military service, it now served to recognise the basic fact of such service. Henley’s stoic pledge – ‘I am the master of my fate’ – has become an act of public tribute. As Nelson has remarked, whatever the cost of the AWM project, ‘as one man said to me: “We’ve already paid. We’ve paid in blood, and whatever the government spends on the Australian War Memorial ... will never be enough”’.⁶

The AWM’s case for re-development rests on several claims. Only four per cent of its collection, for example, can currently be displayed (a figure twice that of the Australian collections of the National Gallery of Australia, or of the National Museum of Australia). Expanded collection storage, visitor amenities and education facilities are also part of the project. Ambitions for better facilities are no doubt expected of cultural institutions, particularly after over thirty years of ‘efficiency dividend’ discipline. But, as Paul Daley and others have argued, the AWM’s leverage now extends far beyond that of its peer organisations, commands bipartisan support, and a particular claim on the state.⁷ At a time when all national cultural institutions are tasked with raising their own funding, and when – as submissions to a current inquiry into their viability by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories attest – budget cuts are eroding core functions, including the self-confessed inability of the National Archives to meet its legislative requirements,⁸ Nelson has emphasised the particular ‘responsibility’ of national government to support the mission of the AWM.⁹

⁴ Closing Ceremony speech from the Patron of the Invictus Games Foundation, the Duke of Sussex, 27 October 2018, <https://invictusgamesfoundation.org/closing-ceremony-speech-from-the-patron-of-the-invictus-games-foundation-the-duke-of-sussex/> (accessed 2 January 2019).

⁵ ‘Australian War Memorial’s \$500m Expansion to Honour “Invictus Generation”’, 1 November 2018, www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-01/australian-war-memorial-to-expand-to-remember-recent-conflicts/10456896 (accessed 2 January 2019).

⁶ ‘Underground Australian War Memorial Expansion Tipped to Top \$500 Million’, 7 April 2018, www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-07/underground-war-memorial-expansion-tipped-to-top-500-million/9627910 (accessed 2 January 2019).

⁷ *Guardian*, 9 April 2018; Robert Manne, ‘Little America’, *The Monthly*, March 2006.

⁸ ‘Deja Vu: Inquiry into Funding Cuts for Canberra’s Cultural Institutions Has a Familiar Ring’, *Canberra Times*, 30 March 2018.

⁹ At least in its submission to that inquiry, Raytheon (a major international weapons manufacturer, and also a sponsor of the Invictus Games) emphasised that its support for Canberra’s Questacon was premised on the shared goals of encouraging the school and university study of STEM disciplines. There was no equivalent support from the several companies involved in the same trade who are corporate partners of the AWM.

That mission has always been distinctive, going back to C.E.W. Bean's advocacy for a fusion of remembrance and museum functions in comprehending the horror and endurance of World War I. In his history of the memorial, Michael McKernan explores how Bean's concept of commemorating through understanding has been negotiated through the not always readily reconciled modes of monument and museum. Delayed in opening until 11 November 1941, by then (McKernan suggests) 'an institution to the dreams of old men', the AWM redefined the dominant axis of the national capital (the solemnity of Anzac Parade replaced the 'prospect' avenue Griffin had allocated to recreation and the arts).¹⁰ In the 1980s, then an admittedly 'poor relation' among Commonwealth cultural institutions, the AWM sought to engage with new curatorial practices at the same time as the Hawke government transferred it to the Veterans' Affairs portfolio, effectively preserving it from the pressure of funding competition.¹¹ In the controversy that followed, AWM staff protested against the 'arbitrary' removal of the memorial from its place as 'an integral part of the national collection'.¹² The Minister for Veterans' Affairs declined to relay such concerns on to the prime minister.¹³ The Returned Services League (RSL) had more success in a national letter-writing campaign through local members of parliament that urged the government not to give in to 'academics'. One of the prime minister's correspondents candidly departed from the RSL's provided script: 'While the Department of Veterans' Affairs may lack the expertise for a memorial, I feel they would be more sympathetic in getting value for the dollar out to the War Memorial'.¹⁴ The AWM remains with Veterans' Affairs.

Canberra has seen plenty of controversies over its cultural institutions. Paul Keating as prime minister was no fan of the National Museum of Australia (NMA), wondering why there needed to be a physical location for its collection at all. The inquiry chaired by John Carroll in 2003 called for more inclusive narratives at the NMA, with the museum soon departing from the conceptual challenge of 'land, nation, people' for the more anodyne 'where our stories live'. Much innovative, creative work goes on beneath such scrutiny, but the zeal for 'branding' nonetheless reveals the political repositioning of these institutions and their collections. In 1941 'They gave their lives' was scored in gilt over the entrance to the AWM's Hall of Memory, which has held the tomb of an unknown soldier since 1993 ('He is all of them and he is one of us'). In 2017 the memorial adopted the new brand: 'for we are young and free'. This conflation of collective affirmation and celebration with considered remembrance is

¹⁰ Michael McKernan, *Here Is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1991), xii, 351.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹² Peter Stanley, representing the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association, to Arthur Gietzelt, 13 December 1984, 'Representations regarding the transfer of the Australian War Memorial to the portfolio of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs', National Archives Australia, Canberra (hereafter NAA) A8742 1985.

¹³ Peter Hewson to Peter Stanley, 22 January 1985, NAA A8742 1985.

¹⁴ Alan Cadman to Bob Hawke, 9 April 1985, NAA A8742 1985.

remarkable, as is the subsuming of a meditation on the facts of conflict and its casualties within such apparent innocence. 'Do what you love', so a recent Australian Defence Force recruiting campaign puts it. The AWM, once conceived as a place for contemplation, seems to be recruited into making the same pitch.

Explicit in this repositioning, and in the rationale for the AWM extension, is also a therapeutic hypothesis that needs closer discussion. Exhibitions are proposed for the memorial's new spaces that will build on the enthusiasm with which it has sought to provide 'a glimpse' into the 'secret world' of 'gruelling training'.¹⁵ 'Live crosses' are to be provided to 'current defence activities'.¹⁶ Again, at a time when cultural institutions are being encouraged to resort to digital services as an alternative to the costs of the physical, and the National Library has at least secured some reprieve for its transformational 'Trove' resource, which enables users to ask any question they wish of our history, 'modernisation' for the AWM seems to promise both the virtual and the real in an expanding partnership, and with a different premise of immediacy and didacticism. As Scott Morrison noted in announcing the \$500 million funding, this investment will offer 'the support our service men and women deserve'.¹⁷ Nelson has added that the memorial will be better prepared to provide 'the therapeutic milieu [a phrase he uses frequently] for these men and women coming back to a country that has no idea what they've done and the impact it has had on them'.¹⁸

But is 'completing the loop' of personal rehabilitation in 'live crosses' to 'secret worlds' the role of a public cultural institution? As Brendon Kelson, a former director of the AWM, argues, what is proposed here seems to 'turn upside down' the 'unique standing' of the memorial's fusion of remembrance and museum.¹⁹ In these formulations the therapeutic role that has increasingly been associated with cultural institutions, encouraging an often tentative exploration of the trauma of personal or group marginalisation by questioning prevailing historical narratives, is replaced by a demand that visitors grasp the unmediated reality of present and past military service in narratives presented as settled. And as has been observed in other contexts, including the exploration of 'truth and reconciliation' in South African memorials and museums, the adoption of a therapeutic model can also serve as a means of forgetting, or setting aside, some more complex questions about the contexts of historical trauma for the sake of manufactured, superficial and ultimately unsustainable narratives of national unity.²⁰ The

¹⁵ Chairman's Address, *Annual Report 2017–2018*, 3–4.

¹⁶ 'Brendan Nelson Announces \$500m Expansion for Australian War Memorial', *News.com.au*, 1 November 2018.

¹⁷ 'Coalition to Spend Half a Billion Dollars on Australian War Memorial Project', *Guardian*, 31 October 2018.

¹⁸ 'Massive Australian War Memorial Redevelopment Could Cost \$500 Million', *Canberra Times*, 7 April 2018.

¹⁹ Brendon Kelson, Submission 18, Parliament of Australia Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, Inquiry into National Cultural Institutions, www.aph.gov.au/nationalinstitutions.

²⁰ See Lynn Meskell and Colette Scheermeyer, 'Heritage as Therapy: Set Pieces from the New South Africa', *Journal of Material Culture* 13, no. 2 (2008): 156.

ethics, let alone the practice, of such a mission are – at the least – daunting in the fusion of public relations and pre-emptive psychological management demanded of curators, heightened by the political transactionalism and opportunism that can lie within our ‘age of apology’.²¹

Several veterans and their representatives have questioned such mixed purposes, arguing there is much to be achieved in more directly supporting the rehabilitation of suffering, marginalised current or ex-personnel in their work, relationships and wellbeing. They have also questioned the need for the AWM to represent every deployment of military assets, whatever their purpose (such as, for example, the inclusion of Operation Sovereign Borders in the new galleries for the AWM).²² And some have questioned the assumption that rendering their experience public property is itself conducive to their healing. The return to the AWM in 2017 of the Long Tan Cross, erected by members of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment at the site of the battle in South Vietnam in August 1966, has already raised a number of both intensely personal questions for veterans, and professional questions for curators. The national ‘narrative’ that the Cross supports in Canberra has been contrasted to the deeper meaning and unfolding processes of atonement and reconciliation with which it was associated by those who visited it in Vietnam.²³

In addition to the continuing debate – heightened by this redevelopment – about *what* conflicts should be included in any new galleries for the AWM (including, most obviously, Australia’s frontier wars), and over *why* the AWM merits such support relative to other national cultural institutions, these issues of *how* military engagement is to be presented also demand attention. The AWM extension promises a radical shift in the intent of the memorial in an already militarised political culture. Jay Winter has noted the significance of the twentieth century in turning our attention to an act of silent contemplation on the massed names of those who died in war, so effectively, simply, achieved in the existing Honour Rolls of the AWM and as exemplified in Washington’s Vietnam memorial.²⁴ The Australian poet, Geoff Page, observed of the ubiquity of war memorials in Australia that while World War II ‘bequeathed us parks and pools ... something in the first demanded stone’.²⁵ What is it about our current time that ‘live crosses’ appear to be the best we can do in registering the cost of war, and in recognising the complex demands of military service?²⁶

²¹ See Sandra Harris, Karen Grainger and Louise Mullany, ‘The Pragmatics of Political Apologies’, *Discourse and Society* 17, no. 6 (2006): 716.

²² ‘RSL Urges Coalition to Match War Memorial Upgrade with Spending on Veterans’ Services’, *Guardian*, 1 November 2018; ‘Australian War Memorial’s \$500m Expansion Attracts Criticism’, *Courier-Mail*, 1 November 2018.

²³ Andrea Witcomb, ‘On Memory, Affect and Atonement: The Long Tan Memorial Cross(es)’, *Historic Environment* 24, no. 3 (2012): 35–42.

²⁴ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Geoff Page, *Small Town Memorials* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 12.

²⁶ McKernan, 345.

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