

# War memorial caught in the crossfire

With three explosive sentences, Australian War Memorial Council chairman Brendan Nelson has unleashed a fierce culture war over how best to exhibit the history of frontier violence.

By CAMERON STEWART

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Should one of the country's most sacred institutions, the Australian War Memorial, do more to commemorate the colonial violence committed against Aboriginal people? It is a contentious question that has bubbled away quietly for years without capturing headlines or broad national attention, until now.

Yet with three explosive sentences, the chairman of the War Memorial Council, Brendan Nelson, has unleashed a fierce culture war between progressives and traditionalists which has seen the venerable War Memorial caught in no-man's land.

"The council has made the decision that we will have a much broader, much deeper depiction and presentation of the violence committed against Aboriginal people, initially by British, then by pastoralists, then by police and by Aboriginal militia," Nelson said late last month.

Nelson was speaking about the plans for the new Memorial galleries to be built under the \$550m expansion to be completed in 2028.

But to many on both sides of this debate, Nelson's words were interpreted as a fundamental shift in the role of the War Memorial and an official recognition that frontier conflicts were a central part of Australia's war history.

The Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney, said she was "thrilled" the War Memorial "will be reflecting the true history of this country and the wars that were fought on this land by our people for their land".

Filmmaker Rachel Perkins, whose recent documentary series *The Australian Wars* helped reveal the breadth and brutality of the frontier wars, described Nelson's comments as a "watershed moment".

Historian Henry Reynolds said it sounded like the Memorial was finally "going to take it up and deal with it seriously", while ABC Radio National breakfast host Patricia Karvelas praised it as "the beginning of something seismic and defining for Australia's national identity".

But news that the Memorial would expand its depiction of frontier violence saw RSL branches across the country flooded with calls from angry veterans who accused the Memorial of abandoning its purpose. RSL Australia president Greg Melick said it was a story which should be told by the National Museum of Australia rather than the War Memorial.

Opposition veteran's affairs spokesman Barnaby Joyce said he "opposed any move that could put the Australian War Memorial at the centre of partisan political debate".

"The fundamental element is that the War Memorial was built in sacred recognition of wars that Australians fought as a nation, unified against an external foe. It is not to be a memorial for conflicts within Australia," Joyce said.

Peta Credlin, conservative commentator and a former adviser to Coalition prime minister Tony Abbott – who is a member of the AWM council – went further, saying the move was "the latest attempt to make Australians feel uncomfortable about our past". "Why turn an institution that should be a source of unity and pride into one of division and shame?"

The question at the heart of this debate is not a reprisal of the so-called History Wars of the early 2000s because there is now much broader acceptance that the frontier violence against Aboriginals between 1788 and Federation was extensive and deadly.

Historians estimate that around 20,000 Aboriginals were killed in frontier violence as well as around 2500 non-Indigenous people, but some claim the figure of Aboriginal deaths is much higher, potentially exceeding 60,000.

The War Memorial opened to the public in 1941 and for more than 40 years it did not seriously entertain the idea that frontier violence should form a part of its exhibits.

A survey by Reconciliation Australia has found that 64 per cent of people now accept the reality of frontier wars, compared to 6 per cent who did not and 30 per cent who were unsure.

Even those who oppose the AWM's position on frontier violence do not dispute that there is an important story to be told about the frontier wars, they just say that the War Memorial is not the right institution to tell it.

The War Memorial opened to the public in 1941 and for more than 40 years it did not seriously entertain the idea that frontier violence should form a part of its exhibits. The Memorial's mission statement, consistent with the vision of the man who conceived it, war historian Charles Bean, was "to commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war or on operational service and those who have served our nation in times of conflict".

The notion of internal violence in Australia, without formal armies and opposing nations, was not a part of Bean's vision.

It was not until the mid-1980s that frontier violence was acknowledged at all in the Memorial's galleries. But this acknowledgment has continued to be on a small scale and exists, in the Memorial's own words, to "provide the necessary context" to "understand the Australian experience of war".

But times have changed and Australia is now confronting a range of Indigenous issues more openly, from the stolen generations, to frontier violence, to the forthcoming referendum on a voice to parliament.

Veterans' Affairs Minister Matt Keogh says it is the duty of all cultural institutions to "raise awareness across the country about the importance of frontier conflict and the impact that it had on our First Nations people and to properly reflect upon and understand our history".

The sticking point is whether this is primarily the role of the War Memorial or other national institutions such as the National Museum of Australia which legislated role includes the telling of Aboriginal history.

The AWM council debated this question twice this year behind closed doors, with the second meeting in mid-year reaching a majority – but not unanimous agreement – to expand the commemoration of frontier violence in the new Memorial galleries.

Insiders say the council's discussion was prompted by a confluence of several factors, including the expected impact of Perkins' documentary series and a lobbying campaign from the Memorial's staff to give greater attention to the issue.

However, Inquirer understands that the expansion of the frontier violence gallery is to be far more modest than many were led to believe after Nelson's comments last month. There are no plans to create a major new permanent exhibition on frontier violence that would come close to rivalling the prominence given to the World Wars or to Vietnam. In fact, current plans for a new gallery include only a modestly expanded exhibition on frontier violence to sit alongside other colonial conflicts including the Boer War, Sudan, the Maori Wars and the Boxer Rebellion.

"The whole thing has been stuffed up, mainly by the press," says Melick, who is a member of the AWM Council. "Brendan Nelson didn't say we were having major new galleries on the frontier wars. He said we will probably do a wider and deeper treatment of it. The RSL doesn't have a problem with that. But others have taken his comments to mean that the War Memorial will have a major new feature on frontier wars and I can tell you that a major feature on frontier wars will piss off the majority of Australia's 600,000 veterans."

Melick says his office has been "inundated" with phone calls from concerned veterans fearing that the Memorial's focus was changing from the soldiers who fought and died for Australia.

Melick says the portrayal of frontier wars within the Memorial should be a limited one because other institutions should be telling that story.

"Have a look at the National Museum of Australia Act where it talks about their responsibility to tell Aboriginal history. Now go and try to find the frontier wars in the National Museum – good luck if you can find it," he says.

Melick says the full story of the frontier wars should be told by both the National Museum and by the new \$320m Ngurra facility to be built in the parliamentary triangle to form a new cultural precinct to commemorate the diversity of Indigenous Australians.

"This is a war memorial and the frontier violence (was not a war) ... it was not a war between nations," he says.

The question of whether frontier violence amounted to a “war” is hotly contested, with both the AWM and the government deliberately avoiding the use of the word “war”. The argument is central to the debate over what weight a national war memorial should give to these conflicts.

Reynolds, historian and honorary professor in Aboriginal studies at the University of Tasmania, believes that frontier violence did amount to a war. He says the 1992 Mabo decision which recognised Indigenous land rights meant that the conflicts were fought over ownership and control of land, the traditional spoils of war.

Reynolds says that the Memorial needs to change with the times. “The standard retreating point is that it is not the purpose that was there when the Memorial was set up and it is not in the statute establishing it,” he says.

“Well, that is true – but the world has changed.”

He believes the question ultimately comes down to whether Aboriginals are truly considered a part of Australia. “The question is are these First Nation men and women our countrymen or not? Are they people whose suffering, fighting and resistance should be commemorated as we commemorate those who went to war?”

Nelson and the AWM council are treading a precarious line through this debate, trying to prevent the Memorial from drifting too far from its original purpose while also trying to reflect the values of a modern Australia.

The council’s decision to approve a modest expansion of the frontier violence exhibits is an attempt to find a compromise solution but it has angered those at both extremes of the debate.

Professor Peter Stanley of UNSW Canberra and a former principal historian with the AWM says that if there is only a “modest” expansion of frontier violence exhibits it would be an insult to First Nations people.

“Including a few spears and muskets in a showcase in a ‘Pre-1914 gallery’ would be worse than ignoring it,” he tells Inquirer.

“So a series of conflicts extending across the entire continent over a century costing 60-80,000 lives would get a corner of a gallery also dealing with the 1885 Sudan expedition which left just nine dead? That would be an insult.

“The Memorial’s intransigence leads me to observe that it’s had a change of mind, not a change of heart. The Memorial needs change at the top. Its council has long reflected attitudes now seriously out of step with today’s Australia.”

The Albanese government backed, but did not pressure, the council in its decision to increase the Memorial’s focus on frontier violence. However, the government, which has pushed for greater “truth telling” about Australia’s colonial history, could choose to influence the AWM’s decisions on frontier violence by making targeted council appointments.

The actual configuration of the expanded Pre-1914 galleries, which will include frontier violence exhibits, will be guided in part by veterans and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander advisory groups. Nelson says the AWM has already accumulated 63 artworks depicting frontier violence but will need to source more exhibits from other institutions.

Nelson, a former AWM director who will leave the council in November, is frustrated that his comments have triggered such a strong reaction from all sides. He denies that the expansion of frontier violence exhibits will undermine the AWM's central purpose.

“As we have had for well over a decade, in the new galleries we will professionally and sensitively present the story of frontier violence perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians to set the context for their service to and suffering for Australia,” he tells Inquirer from Washington DC.

“It will be of modest dimensions. It will also complement the full story of the relationship between the First Australians and Europeans that is the responsibility of the National Museum of Australia. I also look forward to the Ngurra facility to present much of this sad history in the axis on the other side of the lake.”

But Nelson says the Memorial also needs to adapt to changing public expectations even if it is not the primary institution which should be telling the story of frontier violence.

“While we remain true to Charles Bean’s vision for the Memorial in a world he could not possibly have imagined, there is a growing expectation from a new generation of Australians that this is a part of our story and an important one to be found, in part, at the AWM,” he said.

“Australia has changed and is changing but the expectations of a new generation of Australians is that the Memorial will present some of this, and that’s essentially what we’ve decided to do.

“In the end I believe this is the right thing to do but it will be proportionate, sensitive and modest, because the main place for telling the story is the National Museum of Australia.”

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