

War Memorial 'consultation' was a sham from the start

• Sue Wareham, David Stephens

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Demolition and construction work has already commenced at the Australian War Memorial. Picture: Karleen Minney

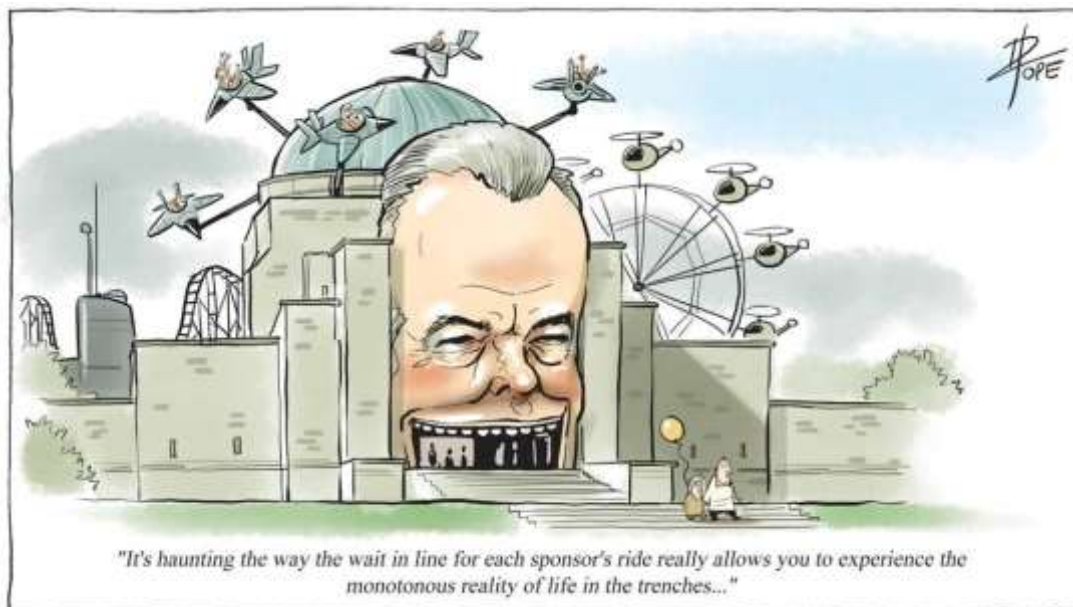
Last Friday marked the closing date for public submissions to the National Capital Authority on the "main works" redevelopment at the Australian War Memorial. While theoretically the NCA's decision on this will determine the future of the Memorial, that decision was almost certainly made long ago. Demolition began at the memorial in late June, many weeks before the current round of NCA "community engagement" even began. That alone makes the NCA's final tick a foregone conclusion.

However it should be noted that the NCA has not once asked the Australian people whether we want a total makeover of our most important place of war commemoration. Instead, it has presided over a process of salami slicing. As early as 2019, approval was granted for a new car park on site, for the purposes of the redevelopment - then far from being approved - and its workers. Earlier this year the public were asked to comment on the "early works" - the demolition - but were expressly instructed to ignore the redevelopment itself.

The NCA didn't even play by its own rules on that occasion. Having stated clearly that the public should limit comment strictly to the "early works", the NCA then proceeded to rely overwhelmingly on the planned redevelopment in its justification for allowing the bulldozers and tree-fellers to move in.

In the "consultations" just concluded, submitters were forced to choose which piece of the whole they wanted to comment on - Anzac Hall and the new glazed link, the new grand entrance (which will bypass the main commemorative area) or the research centre. Forget any notion of the memorial being a single unit. The process was like being asked to comment on a three-storey building, floor by floor. Do you like the ground floor? No? How about just the top two floors?

The earlier phases in this sorry saga of decision-making tell us more about this corruption of due process. On November 1, 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the \$500 million redevelopment, seven weeks before the detailed business case was fully delivered to the government. On August 21, 2018, then AWM director Brendan Nelson had told an interdepartmental committee of AWM Council chairman Kerry Stokes' personal guarantee that no more than \$500 million of government funding would be sought. Does this mean Mr Stokes has to stump up if there is a cost overrun?



The Canberra Times' editorial cartoon for the June 2018 edition of the Public Sector Informant. Illustration: David Pope

The public support for the proposal claimed at the time of the PM's announcement was based on feedback from just 134 people over two months in 2018. Yet a petition opposing the proposal in April 2019, organised by the Heritage Guardians, gained more than 1200 signatures in just two weeks. The memorial has continued to grossly overstate the level of support, using surveys marked by biased information, significant omissions and leading questions. In an AWM online survey in February 2020, only half of those surveyed had ever been to the memorial, and only 21 per cent knew anything about the redevelopment plans. Most of them were therefore completely reliant on what the AWM - the proponents - told them. By contrast,

independent measures of public opinion have repeatedly shown extremely strong opposition to the project.

On December 10, 2020, Environment Minister Sussan Ley granted heritage approval, despite the virtually unanimous and very serious concerns from heritage experts, including from the Australian Heritage Council which advises the government, and from the minister's own department.

The Public Works Committee of Federal Parliament was next to fall into line to grant approval. Despite a record number of submissions to its inquiry, with about 75 per cent of them being against the proposal, it gave its approval in February 2021, albeit with a dissenting report.

Thus the NCA was the last line of defence against a hugely unpopular proposal to transform one of our most important national institutions, against overwhelming expert advice and at vast financial cost. It failed us utterly, and virtually abrogated responsibility to even try, hiding behind decisions already made, including that of Ley.

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What exactly is the purpose of the NCA then, if it will simply obey the minister of the day and not independently assess the matters on which it must decide? The need for independent assessment could not have been greater on this occasion, and yet the proposal sailed through. Where we needed integrity, we've had a series of rubber stamps.

From the outset, the AWM has promoted the redevelopment as if it were fully approved. In August 2019, Nelson told critics that "the train has left the station". In July of that year, the memorial's catering contractor, Trippas White Group, was already pitching the new, remodelled Anzac Hall to potential customers.

The National Capital Plan, which the NCA is tasked to uphold, refers to the "symbolism and dignity" of our national capital. But what does it symbolise about us as a nation, when our most important space for commemorating wars' victims is about to be overshadowed in scale and prominence by an exhibition of military hardware? While community members have been marginalised, centre stage will be granted to the weapons of war, to be

displayed alongside - assuming current AWM practice continues - honourable mentions of the corporations that make them.

If any good can be salvaged from this process, may it be a renewed awareness that the democracy we preach to others is in serious trouble right here at home, and a genuine discussion on the role of vested interests in our war commemoration.

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