

Two Aboriginal sculptures spark debate at Australian War Memorial



By [Steve Evans](#)

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There's an intense debate behind the scenes at the Australian War Memorial about two controversial sculptures of Aboriginal people which are set in a row of carvings depicting animals.

The two faces of an Indigenous man and a woman in the Memorial's main courtyard are in a row of similar [carved stone depictions](#) of animals, including a kangaroo, platypus, frogmouth owl and carpet snake.

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One of the First Nations advisors to the Memorial said he was "saddened" by the depiction of Indigenous human beings alongside animals in that way.

"We'd prefer them not to be there, or packed away in some sort of historical collection," Frank Lampard who was called up to serve during the Vietnam War said.

He serves on the Memorial's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group which he said had discussed the faces. "We had a discussion about them and people were feeling uncomfortable about them," he said, adding that he does not speak on behalf of the group.

Some historians, including the President of the Australian Historical Association, want notices put up near the two Aboriginal faces explaining that they were erected in different, more racist times.

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The row of sculptures were installed in 1941 as gargoyles (which means they had spouts for water).

But during building work eight years ago, they were removed and then replaced - but with the spouts only remaining on the animal faces.

"The local Aboriginal community said, 'We don't want them used as drains'," the new head of the Memorial's ruling council, Kim Beazley, said. The result was that they were put back but without the pipes. The other 24, animal depictions remain as gargoyles.

But the argument has now been reopened.

The alternatives seem to be: keep the Indigenous faces alongside the animals; remove them; or keep them with some sort of explanation to further historical understanding.

"Obliteration obviously removes any possibility of such a process," Frank Bongiorno, professor of history at the ANU and President of the Australian Historical Association, said.

"A plaque created through consultation with the people affected or interested can be valuable as an occasion for recognition and discussion."

Another historian agreed. "I strongly believe that they should not be removed because they document a time when Aboriginal people were thought of as fauna (animal life)," Peter Stanley, honorary professor at the University of New South Wales, said.

"It's an idea that many Australians believed and we shouldn't pretend and airbrush it out of our past. Visitors have to be able to see the sculptures to see what it meant."

But he wanted a plaque nearby - "an explanatory panel," as he called it. "It has to be accessible to visitors."

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Reporter

Steve Evans is a reporter on The Canberra Times. He's been a BBC correspondent in New York, London, Berlin and Seoul and the sole reporter/photographer/paper deliverer on The Glen Innes Examiner in country New South Wales. "All the jobs have been fascinating - and so it continues."

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