

Unnecessary Expansions: The Australian War Memorial

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War is not merely a matter of sowing death, much of it needless; it entails preserving a rationale to perpetuate it. The mistake often made about reading, consulting and listening to the harrowing tales of those who have perished in battle or those who survived them is to presume that these should not happen again. Politicians, generals and strategists are all in the game: the dead are merely a reminder that more blood must be shed. Weak, imprecise terms are thrown about by way of justification: they died so that we could be free. Forget the bungling, the bad faith, the expediency.

One ample manifestation of this distasteful indulgence is the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. This particular entity can hardly be said to be short of cash but was promised \$498 million that would have gone to other starved national institutions. Half a billion is hardly a pittance, and the war memorial complex has been preparing since the announcement was made last year.

The proposal is meant to address a few points, some structural, others specific to narrative. (Wars are about stories, often distorted ones, especially when massaged by the State.) Spatial issues have become significant; Australia remains busy fighting the wars of others, and so finds itself running out of commemorative room. Officials feel that more should be made for a modern generation of fighters.

There is also push towards trendy digitisation, a pneumatic substitute that does wonders to hide rather than illuminate conflict; every site where Australians have fallen will have a display, termed Places of Pride. A focus on Australia's more recent involvements will also be a priority. In the [words](#) of Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison**,

"It means the Australian War Memorial will be able to display more of their collection and proudly tell the stories from recent years in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Solomon Islands and East Timor."

For Australian War Memorial director, **Brendan Nelson**, Australian military deployments from the Boer War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean conflict and Vietnam [were](#) "largely told" in crowded confines.

"Yet the service of 70,000 young Australians in the Middle East Area of operations of the past two decades currently covers only two percent of available space."

No opposition was registered by Bill Shorten's Labour Party to this excessive splurge.

Sniffing the prospects of a future government portfolio, Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs **Amanda Rishworth** [stated](#) her party's unconditional approval of the bloated funding proposal to the defence forces.

"Whatever political arguments we have in the chambers on either side of this room, both parties are [...] united in our respect for your service."

To be sure, there have been various Australians irritated and outraged by the measure. Last month, they decided, via [The Honest History website](#), to add their signatures to a letter signed by 83 or so, 24 of which, for what it's worth, have received the Order of Australia. Thomas Keneally has been traditionally indignant at the proposed folly, as have other authors. But the opposition has not merely come from scribes and wordsmiths who might be accused of progressive tendencies. There is an air of protesting officialdom about many of them. **Paul Barrett**, former Department of Defence secretary, is a signatory, as is Brendon Kelson and Liam Hanna, former director and assistant directors of the AWM.

Nelson's sins have been those of zeal wedded to money. He, the signatories accuse, tout "the Memorial as telling 'our story'" yet show "excessive veneration of the Anzac story". This denied "the richness of our history." There was also an element of plain old vandalism about the whole matter. "His and his Council's ambitions will destroy the Memorial's character and entail the demolition of Anzac Hall, opened in 2001 and winner of the 2005 Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture."

The voices generally tread the line of fine logic. ANU history academic **Frank Bongiorno** is [unconvinced](#) by the heralded role a ballooning war memorial is meant to have.

"The AWM is already a very large institution, and I don't buy into a lot of the discussion about the AWM having a therapeutic role in relation to healing returned service personnel as a justification for this. The notion you have to spend a half-a-billion to play that role appropriately and functionally just doesn't seem plausible to me."

Of the political parties, only the Greens have offered some measure of sense, though these do take aim at the more patriotic sensibilities of the war crazed. Arms manufacturer sponsorship, for instance, should end; the Frontier Wars and the Tent Embassy should be commemorated and recognised.

While valuing the War Memorial, **Senator Richard Di Natale** [suggested](#) that the expansion "to showcase military hardware is deeply inappropriate, especially when our other National Institutions don't have the funds to repair their leaky roofs." Australia's National Institutions, reminded former Greens Senator and leader Christine Milne, spoke of the corrosion caused by the "efficiency dividends" principle to Australia's National Institutions. The sacred will have an endless money pot.

Selling war and its merits has been the crass way states have done so for centuries and Australia's inflated expenditure in the name of remembering the dead [exceeds](#) that of other states by some margin. Memorials should be a reminder of loss and warning; they have become, instead, the means by which the apologetics for conflicts past, present and future can be promoted. The redirection of funds to the AWM says much about the priorities of the Morrison government, supported, as it were, by the Labor opposition: the war complex

needs feeding, even as the roof of the National Gallery of Australia leaks.

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