

ACTION ALERT AA 19-4: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL EXPANSION

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

April 2019

The War Memorial, established to honour those Australians who have fought in wars, has become a focus for considerable concern as it seeks substantial expansion of its museum spaces. This Alert outlines the plans and the responses and suggests ways to follow up the issues involved.

Background

According to the AWM Act 1980, the functions of the Australian War Memorial are as follows:

Functions of Memorial

- (1) The functions of the Memorial are:
 - (a) to maintain and develop the national memorial referred to in subsection 6(1) of the *Australian War Memorial Act 1962* as a national memorial of Australians who have died:
 - (i) on or as a result of active service; or
 - (ii) as a result of any war or warlike operations in which Australians have been on active service;
 - (b) to develop and maintain, as an integral part of the national memorial referred to in paragraph (a), a national collection of historical material;
 - (c) to exhibit, or to make available for exhibition by others, historical material from the memorial collection or historical material that is otherwise in the possession of the Memorial;
 - (d) to conduct, arrange for and assist in research into matters pertaining to Australian military history; and
 - (e) to disseminate information relating to:
 - (i) Australian military history;
 - (ii) the national memorial referred to in paragraph (a);
 - (iii) the memorial collection; and
 - (iv) the Memorial and its functions.
- (2) The Memorial shall use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the memorial collection in the national interest.

Over the years there has been significant development of the building at the end of Anzac Parade, Canberra. It is one of the most visited places in Canberra. In addition, there is a large amount of storage space at a building in the suburb of Mitchell.

Plans for Expansion

The government has announced plans to provide funding of \$498m for extensions/renovations to the building, including demolition of Anzac Hall which is one of the more recent additions. This follows large sums spent on the Anzac Centenary and the Monash Centre in France. According to a report in *The Canberra Times* (23 March 2019), a war memorial spokesman said it consulted the public about the redevelopment and engaged with architects opposed to the planned demolition of Anzac Hall.

"A decision had been made by the Australian government to support the project, as the overwhelming majority of Australians do, and it will proceed as planned. The memorial's mission includes leading the development of understanding of Australia's wartime experience....The expansion would enhance the memorial and open more of the original building and collection to visitors".

The 2019-20 Budget proposes about 15 additional staff to work on expansion plans, while staff numbers of the Museum of Australian Democracy (located in Old Parliament House) have been cut. The Labor Party has supported the plans. The Greens have opposed them and sought to spread the funds across all Canberra cultural institutions.

Open Letter against the Plans

More than 80 distinguished Australians (including historians, architects, artists, doctors, public servants, academics, lawyers, journalists, diplomats) have signed a letter opposing the plans and making the following points:

- The Memorial has been treated most generously by successive government and suffered less from the 'efficiency dividend' that has damaged other national institutions.
- The Director, Brendan Nelson, says the Memorial tells 'our story', but Australia has many stories, and excessive veneration of the Anzac story denies the richness of our history.
- Recent conflicts should be represented in proportion to their significance, and responsibility for veterans' welfare belongs with the Defence and Veterans' Affairs agencies.

Others have joined the public debate about this by pointing out that:

- The proposed funding well exceeds anything for other national institutions in Canberra. The storage building in Mitchell provides ample space for housing large equipment items and offers easy access to the public as needed.
- Australia's national memory is being increasingly militarised. Adding further weaponry to the museum would show how wars have been fought but not why.
- Such an emphasis on war-making and weapons is not suited in a place of reflection which honours the memory of those who have died in war.
- The planned direct internet feed on current Defence Department activities is totally inappropriate in a war memorial.
- There should be a focus on remembering those who defended their land in the Frontier Wars.
- Priority should be given to other funding such as overseas aid and meeting veterans' needs.
- Demolition of Anzac Hall after only 17 years is 'architectural vandalism', given that the Hall's design won a major award for public architecture.

- The extensions would have an adverse impact on an area of bush currently used for an Aboriginal remembrance ceremony each Anzac Day.
- The proposal (originally included in the report of the National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary) for an Anzac Centre for the Study of Peace, Conflict and War should be revived.

Action

Messages of concern can be sent to the following:

- Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Hon Darren Chester MP – minister@dva.gov.au
- Shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Amanda Rishworth MP – Amanda.Rishworth.MP@aph.gov.au
- Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten MP - Bill.Shorten.MP@aph.gov.au
- Other MPs and Senators.

Heritage Guardians have launched a petition to the Leader of the Opposition, which can be signed at www.change.org

Another option is to sign the Honest History petition – <http://honesthistory.net.au/petition-on-change-org-against-proposed-war-memorial-expansions/>

Canberra, April 2019