

## **The Senate, Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Submission**

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### **Authors**

1. History is one of the central fields of study in the social sciences and humanities at the Australian National University. The university has played a pioneering role in the study of Australian history in particular, including Indigenous history and archaeology. In the twentieth century, leading ANU historians – including W.K. Hancock, Manning Clark and Ann Curthoys – have contributed profoundly to understandings of Australian national identity. Books that have shaped Australian national identity such as Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958) and Bill Gammage’s *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (1974) began their lives as doctoral theses in history at the ANU. This submission represents the work of a group of current historians, including doctoral candidates, within the School of History, but it develops many of the concerns that have occupied historians at the ANU for many decades. It is particularly concerned with Terms of Reference (a), (c) and (e), but will touch on other matters.

### **Background**

2. The concept of Australian national identity in its modern form emerged in the 1960s, its appearance reflecting new ways of understanding the place of Australia – and that of other former colonies – in the post-war international order.

3. Many Australians regarded themselves as “British” as well as “Australian” before the 1960s. The United Kingdom’s turn to Europe – epitomised by its first, unsuccessful, bid to join the European Economic Community (1961-1963) – was among the factors sparking a major debate about Australia’s place in the world. The emergence of the so-called new nationalism, a response to the end of British Australia, represented a more assertive Australian identity.<sup>1</sup> The study of Australian history in schools and universities, and the publication of a vast body of research in the field, contributed to the making of national identity in this era.

4. These developments occurred in the context of a more assertive Indigenous rights movement, the formal abolition of the White Australia Policy, and the development of multiculturalism. The 1980s saw much contestation over national identity, growing attention to Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Davidson, “The De-dominionisation of Australia”, *Meanjin* (38, 2, July 1979): 139-53; Stuart Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2001); James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

historical narratives, and the resurgence of Anzac as a focus for nationhood.<sup>2</sup> Each of these developments has shaped and informed Australian national identity and, as a result, the conduct of our democracy.

5. The High Court's *Mabo* (1992) and *Wik* (1996) judgements provided a frontal challenge to conventional narratives of white pioneering and progress, and recast understandings of land, country and belonging. Australian national identity remains contested and fundamentally "political" – the subject of the "perpetual seminar" that is the very essence of modern nationhood in a globalising world.<sup>3</sup>

### **Institutional independence and capacity**

6. The strength of Australia's democratic institutions is central to Australian nationhood itself. A shared understanding of the historical significance of these institutions must form the basis of any appreciation of their continuing significance and should discourage their being taken for granted and hence degraded.

7. The success of our economy and polity has depended on a relatively wide distribution of economic opportunity and political power, and on an extensive role for governments in providing services that should not be subjected to party politics. Statutory authorities have been widely deployed for the purpose of providing a buffer against direct political interference, but there have also been long-standing traditions of public service independence that have generally worked well. The most extended period of economic prosperity in modern Australian history, between the 1940s and 1970s, relied to some extent on the expertise of a professional public service able to keep an arm's length from government.<sup>4</sup>

8. The erosion of Australian democracy detected by the Committee, and of public trust in its institutions, has been accompanied by growing levels of political control over key public institutions. Autonomy is no longer to be taken for granted. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is one example; universities are another. A model of the Australian Public Service as offering advice to guide and inform government is increasingly replaced by one emphasising responsiveness to ministerial direction.

9. More generally, while the winding back of the protective state and elevation of markets might have delivered efficiencies, it has also contributed to eroding public faith in the capacity of government to grapple with serious systemic issues. Economic inequality, low productivity, stagnant wages, housing unaffordability, educational underperformance and anthropogenic climate change come to mind. There is a comparison to be made here with the four previous

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Bongiorno, *The Eighties: The Decade That Transformed Australia* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2015), esp. ch. 8.

<sup>3</sup> John Howard, "The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government", Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 1996, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10171>

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015); Samuel Furphy, *The Seven Dwarfs and the Age of Mandarins: Australian Government Administration in the Post-War Reconstruction Era* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015).

periods of major institutional change in Australian history, the 1850s-1860s, the 1890s-1900s, the 1940s-1950s and 1980s-1990s, when governments had the capacity to identify the nature of key problems and devise workable solutions to many of them – in each case by drawing on the authority of the state, the trust of the electorate, and the allocative efficiency of markets.

10. Australia was once a leader in policy, with its democratic innovation forming a centrepiece of its national identity linked to initiatives such as women's suffrage and the living wage, but it is now widely seen to lag behind international best practice in many areas. The effect is to undermine both social well-being and national confidence.

11. It is striking that one area of state activity which remains well-regarded, for the most part, is the royal commission, a form of enquiry that occurs at arm's length from government. When allowed to play an independent role, royal commissions have helped to re-engage citizens with government, salve personal and social wounds, and advance constructive policy ideas. The royal commission illustrates the principles of independence and autonomy that ought to inform a much wider range of institutions and functions than is presently the case.

***Recommendation 1: That the Federal Government commit to greater independence for the Australian Public Service and the wider use of independent statutory authorities, public enquiries and royal commissions.***

### **The local, regional and multicultural**

12. As the Committee notes, a historical perspective is vital to this enquiry not because it will uncover an essential national identity, but because it highlights the changing influences on our understandings of “the nation” itself. Over the past two decades, the dynamics of globalisation have elevated the role of nations in managing the diversity within their societies through concepts such as multiculturalism. That diversity often has distinct spatial dimensions, drawing on regional resources and reflecting regional vulnerabilities. Promoting a more inclusive sense of nationhood should begin in recognising these dimensions.

13. Australian historians have demonstrated that local and regional identities help constitute the individual's affinity with the national community. This work recognises the patterns of Indigenous occupation, and the phases of colonial conflict; it takes account of the continent's variety of ecologies and landscapes; and it acknowledges the imprints of generations in specific places, with their mixing of cultures and experience. Capturing this diversity has involved multiple forms and scales of historical practice, from the history of families and communities, testimony and memory, through to the study of environmental impacts and adjustment. Recently, the *Defining Moments* project, launched at the National Museum of Australia in 2014, and which encourages an interactive exchange on the events that exemplify the national “story”, has captured how often people find their voice in localised ideas of place and identity.<sup>5</sup> Recovering the historical “everyday” of nationhood has the capacity to dispel the alienation

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments>

that concerns the Committee, and to energise engagement with central aspects of contemporary Australian society.

***Recommendation 2: That the Federal Government renews its commitment to multiculturalism and explicitly rejects the idea of a homogenous national identity through a major policy statement.***

***Recommendation 3: That the Federal Government addresses the marginalisation of the regional and the local implied in growing concentrations of cultural, political and economic power through a major policy statement.***

### **Indigenous Australians and national identity**

14. The resurgence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history since the 1970s has presented a powerful alternative to “The Great Australian Silence”.<sup>6</sup> This awareness has often been stimulated by important episodes in Australian public policy, such as land rights and native title legislation, and public inquiries (such as those into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and into the Stolen Generations, a term coined by the ANU historian Peter Read) which have in themselves become vital moments in the definition of Australian nationhood.

15. The practice of history itself has been energised in this process, as archival records have been “read against the grain”, and oral histories and knowledge have interrogated absences, distortions, misrepresentations and misunderstandings in Australia’s economic, political, cultural and environmental history. All Australians, whether in communities, schools, universities, sporting associations, conservation groups or the creative arts, have benefited from this transformation.

16. This momentum must not be lost. There can be little so alienating, and inimical to civic involvement, as invisibility in the national story; it is only marginally preferable to be present but to have no involvement in how one’s people or interests are portrayed. It is striking that among the various cultural institutions located in the national capital and inside the parliamentary triangle, after almost 120 years of nationhood there is still no national memorial to the frontier wars, no conspicuous recognition in Canberra of the prior Indigenous ownership of the country, and no “keeping place” in which the remains of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could be interred in a respectful manner. The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories’ report *Telling Australia’s Story – and why it’s important: Report on the inquiry into Canberra’s national institutions* (2019) recommended the establishment of such an institution in Canberra’s Parliamentary Zone, as a relocation of

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<sup>6</sup> John Howard, “The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government”, Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 1996, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10171>

the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and an expansion of its “remit and facilities”.<sup>7</sup> We support this recommendation.

17. There has arguably been a disproportionate investment in some of our national stories – notably those connected with war and Anzac – at the expense of other narratives. The Australian War Memorial is a highly-regarded and well-resourced institution, but has chosen to exclude the frontier wars from its galleries, its director arguing that this is a task for other institutions. But there is no national cultural institution currently playing this role.

18. Recognising the damage to Indigenous people arising from largely negative and problem-orientated portrayals, education and research institutions are steadily pushing past a deficit discourse to emphasise the dynamism of Aboriginal historical and cultural knowledge.<sup>8</sup> There is a growing appreciation that the telling of that history can enrich Australian historiography, in the same way that First Nations involvement in archaeology enriches the processes and practices of that discipline.

19. Initiatives at the ANU provide examples of such new partnerships and impacts. The Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Project, *Rediscovering the Deep Human Past: Global Networks, Future Opportunities* is integrating Indigenous narratives with scientific evidence to create new approaches to the history of Greater Australia/Sahul. The ARC Discovery Project *An Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which is guided by a working party composed of Indigenous scholars, will publish biographies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are considered significant to their communities and complement the outstanding service the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* has provided to the understanding of Australian history for fifty years.

20. These projects advance the principles of the Makarrata Commission proposal, as enunciated in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. They indicate the potential to reinforce the proposed parliamentary “declarations of recognition” and – in the terms of the *Uluru Statement* – to confront “the torment of our powerlessness” by allowing future generations to “walk in two worlds”.

***Recommendation 4: That the Uluru Statement from the Heart is treated by government as a clear expression of Indigenous aspirations for nationhood, national identity and democracy.***

***Recommendation 5: That the Uluru Statement from the Heart’s call for “truth-telling about our history” should be reflected in an appropriate national institution***

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<sup>7</sup> Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *Telling Australia’s Story – and why it’s important: Report on the inquiry into Canberra’s national institutions* (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2019): xviii (Recommendation 13)

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Bamblett, “Rags to Riches: Aboriginal Identity as Deficit”, in Lawrence Bamblett, Fred Myers and Tim Rowse, eds, *The Difference Identity Makes: Indigenous Cultural Capital in Australian Cultural Fields* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2019):141-156.

*such as a “keeping place” that will deal honestly with Australia’s history and identity and embody Indigenous aspirations, as set out in the Uluru Statement, “for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination”.*

## Civics and History Education

21. The importance of civics and history education for ensuring the long-term sustainability of democracy in Australia cannot be overestimated. A well-informed citizenry is the lifeblood of democracy itself. Yet in recent years, excessive attention to Australia’s military activities as the basis of nationhood has not only perpetuated misunderstandings of the nature of the Australian experience of war, it has crowded out an appreciation of Australia’s substantial civic achievements.

22. Whether the objectives of senior secondary History curricula are being fulfilled requires urgent research. Curricula characteristically commit to helping students make “judgements and actions”, preparing them for “active and informed citizenship”.<sup>9</sup> There is, however, evidence of disengagement among students from Australian history, and particularly from Australia’s democratic past and present.<sup>10</sup> This disengagement carries through to tertiary education where too few students self-select Australian history subjects.

23. Over two decades, the Australian Government has exercised greater influence over state government education curricula and funding, culminating in the National Curriculum. The National Curriculum in History promoted a broad understanding of Australian history in global context, but has been adopted by states only patchily, in part because insufficient emphasis at both state and federal level is placed on history education and the proper training of history teachers.

24. Experience in the United Kingdom suggests that centralisation can breed resentment among teaching staff.<sup>11</sup> Teacher autonomy in the classroom is most likely to result in innovative education, especially if teachers have had the training to allow them to teach history confidently. In line with our emphasis on institutional autonomy and the recognition of diversity, we suggest that there needs to be a secure place for the study of the local and the regional in school history curricula, and for state government to figure alongside national government in the study of Australian institutions and citizenship.

25. *In situ* learning is also valuable in helping students acquire the necessary understanding of these institutions. *Telling Australia’s Story* recommended a “comprehensive review” of the

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<sup>9</sup> WA SCSA, “Modern History”, 2014, <https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/syllabus-and-support-materials/humanities-and-social-sciences/modern-history>; NESA, Aim and Objectives: Modern History”, 2019, <https://www.educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/hsie/modern-history-2017/aim-and-objectives>

<sup>10</sup> Anna Clark, *History’s Children: History Wars in the Classroom* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Mary Catherine Woolley, “Experiencing the History National Curriculum 1991 – 2011: Voices of Veteran Teachers”, *History of Education*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2019): 231.

Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) Program.<sup>12</sup> In May 2019, the federal Government committed to a substantial rebate increase.<sup>13</sup> That said, there has been no comprehensive review. The report also called for Canberra's national institutions to "improve collaboration" with one another and the Commonwealth.<sup>14</sup> This collaboration is essential for ensuring that Canberra school trips are made as educationally effective as possible.

***Recommendation 6: That the Federal Government sponsor research into the best ways of supporting creative and stimulating educational practice in teaching Australian history.***

***Recommendation 7: That the Federal Government consider sponsoring an annual civics education conference in Canberra, with delegates from organisations such as the Museum of Australian Democracy, the National Electoral Education Centre, Parliament House, the Australian War Memorial, the history teachers' associations, the Australian Historical Association, federal and state education departments, and classroom humanities teachers.***

***Recommendation 8: That the Federal Government consider developing an accessible digital hub, inclusive of national, state and regional cultural institutions and universities, with the task of fostering access to collections, understanding of the Australian political system, and discussion of Australians' diverse experiences of nationhood.***

## **Cultural institutions and universities**

26. Cultural institutions and universities are central to maintaining social cohesion. Leading institutions around the world are using historical approaches to support a process of active reflection on contemporary nationhood, citizenship and cultural identity. They increasingly draw on modern digital technology, as in the case of the National Library of Australia's outstanding Trove database. The web increasingly permits such institutions to operate on a genuinely national basis and even to project the Australian presence internationally.

27. Two recent Australian Government reports recognise this contribution: *Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers* (2019) and *Telling Australia's Story*. Both acknowledge that our best institutions are able to nurture civic engagement because they are maintained as places of civic trust. Cultural institutions and universities are recognising that if they wish to nurture learning and exchange, they must welcome all Australians.

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<sup>12</sup> Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *Telling Australia's Story*, xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Tehan and Nola Merino, "Cheaper School Excursions for Remote and Regional Families: Media Release", The Liberal Party of Australia, 7 May 2019, <https://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2019/05/07/cheaper-school-excursions-remote-and-regional-families>

<sup>14</sup> Joint Standing Committee, *Telling Australia's Story*, ix.

28. Internationally, leading institutions are “recalibrating” themselves in response to the societal, intellectual and political shifts that are taking place around them.<sup>15</sup> The agreement to develop a new definition of museums as “democratising institutions” at a recent extraordinary meeting of the International Council of Museums registers the same awareness, as does the Australian Museums and Galleries Association’s *First Peoples: a roadmap for enhancing Indigenous engagement in museums and galleries* (2019).

29. *Telling Australia’s Story* recommends that the Museum of Australian Democracy should aspire to leave visitors “educated and excited about their agency in Australia’s political system and how they can play a more active part in it”.<sup>16</sup> This expectation should be extended more widely. Universities and cultural institutions should be trusted spaces that promote historically informed discussion of national ideas, and strive for a fundamentally inclusive understanding of the many facets of the Australian story.<sup>17</sup>

30. Universities are currently caught between a desire to contribute to national conversations and an imperative to succeed in the global information industry. There is a tension between the measures of performance that are increasingly elevated in Australian universities, such as publication with prestigious international (meaning, principally, British and North American) journals and book publishers, and the crucial responsibility to produce knowledge that contributes meaningfully to national conversations. We need to be vigilant in ensuring that in their quest for internationalisation, Australian universities and cultural institutions in general do not reinstate “the cultural cringe”.

***Recommendation 9: That Federal Government funding of cultural institutions recognises their essential role in underpinning trust in democracy, promoting rational debate, and contributing to national identity and social cohesion.***

***Recommendation 10: That higher education policy provide incentives to ensure that universities remain connected to their national, state and regional constituencies, and are enabled to strike an appropriate balance between their national responsibilities and global aspirations.***

## Conclusion

31. The approach to nationhood, national identity and democracy outlined in this submission is a pluralist one. It recognises that there is no single national story, and that any privileging of one narrative over another is inevitably a political act with consequences. A democratically-elected government has a role to perform in the articulation and ordering of national narratives,

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<sup>15</sup> Trust in museums in the UK: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954534>

Trust in museums in the US:

<https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/04/26/people-trust-museums-more-than-newspapers-here-is-why-that-matters-right-now-data/>

<sup>16</sup> Joint Standing Committee, *Telling Australia’s Story*, ix.

<sup>17</sup> Trust in Australian universities: <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/dont-blame-voters-for-a-lack-of-trust-in-institutions>



but this needs to be done with great caution, and in the context of dispersed authority and strong checks and balances.

32. Government has a part to play in facilitating truth-telling about the past – especially about those aspects of the past that are uncomfortable and therefore liable to marginalisation and silencing. The benefit of acknowledging these histories far outweighs any discomfort that might be caused. They provide the precondition for meaningful Indigenous engagement with and representation within narratives of national identity. But governments cannot promote truth-telling if they have an excessive investment in one aspect of the past, or a particular way of interpreting the past – commitments which must necessarily be at the expense of others.

33. Australia has a strong record of democratic innovation, such as in running free and fair elections, in votes for women, and in social policy such as the living wage. More recent innovations, such as Medicare and strict gun laws, are seen by many international observers as models of their kind. These stories also should be told, and their evolving contribution to Australians' sense of themselves needs to be well understood. The reward for us all is likely to be a greater sense of connection with a resilient but troubled Australian democracy that finds itself in turbulent international waters.