

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

OPENING OF FIRST EXHIBITION: MADE IN AUSTRALIA

CANBERRA, 10 MARCH 1990

THE LUCKY, CLEVER AND CIVILIZED COUNTRY

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The Hon Justice Michael Kirby CMG
Acting Chief Justice of New South Wales

A COCKTAIL OF LAUNCHES

With the possible exception of Dame Edna Everage, I am involved in the launch of more books, exhibitions and enterprises than any other Australian, save for politicians and ex-politicians. The most notable launcher of them all is Mr Gough Whitlam. I once saw him launch a book. Within days the book sold out, the government changed and Mr Whitlam was appointed Ambassador to UNESCO. I do not look for a similar reward. I was surprised that Mr Whitlam did not receive the invitation to launch this first exhibition. I suspect he may have had word that lamingtons would be served with morning tea. Those of you with a long memory will recall that Mr Albert Field was tempted from the straight and narrow path of the Australian Labor Party by Lady Bjelke-Petersen's lamingtons.

A few weeks ago, against the backdrop of the Sydney Opera House I was involved in the launch of the national programme of a new body designed to promote interest in the

arts. This is Arts Action: Australia. The other "launchers" were David Williamson, the playwright and Joan Carden, the opera singer. The endeavour was to put the arts, and support for the arts, on the political agenda of Australia during the election.

I took part as the token citizen. I called attention to the importance of the politics of the arts. There is a general disillusionment in our community concerning the political process. At this fragile moment the politicians who wish to capture the large number of voters who are undecided, will seek out the winning issues. Political self-interest will endeavour to identify the issues of imagination that will capture the attention of a listless and somewhat cynical electorate.

The arts are international. The Director General of UNESCO, Mr Frederico Mayor, launching the World Decade for Cultural Development pointed out that arts and culture cannot be disassociated from the development of society, including its economic growth and political and economic orientation. Culture is an intrinsic part of life and awareness. It is an international thing. And we in Australia must do our part as citizens of the wider world to record, study and display the treasures of our civilization.

There are many economic factors that support increased government subventions for the arts. They include the support of the arts for the tourist industry which bears promise of such importance in the Australian economy in the

years ahead. There is only so much time that tourists can spend in duty-free stores. They need galleries and museums to stimulate and reward their visits. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney welcomed 4 million visitors in less than 2 years of operation. It is now one of the country's major tourist attractions.

And then there is the Ozymandias factor. We must appeal to it more in the future than we have in the past. You will all recall Shelley's immortal lines:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings
Look on my works ye mighty, and despair."

It is not the interest rates or the level of GDP per capita of Ancient Egypt of the time of Ramses II that is remembered. It is the treasurehouse of culture and civilization, the works of artists and artisans collected in museums and displayed to the world, that are recalled and valued. We must get this message over to the modern Ramses of Australia in all political parties. Those who aspire to leave a mark must remember the headless trunks of stone standing in the desert.

The arts - including museums - justify themselves. A politician of the idealism of President Havel of Czechoslovakia can see this clearly. Sadly, in the ferment of ideas of the world today we seem to live in an antipodean backwater. It is the duty of all civilized people in Australia to raise the public debate about the arts.

CAPTURED BY THE DISMAL SCIENCE

Reflecting on the current election campaign, I confess to the conviction that Australia has been captured by the dismal science of economics. Election campaigns have been hijacked by the formidable combination of journalists and economists. I consider that this is why there is a general sense of ennui in the Australian community at this time of election. The people know that you do not live by interest rates alone. Yet the conspiracy of journalists and economists seems determined to bore the Australian electorate to death. Contrast the exciting situation in Eastern Europe. Contrast the sorts of things the emanate from the mind and pen of leaders such as Havel. Is it too much to ask that we in Australia should have similar inspiration, insight and foresight from our leaders?

We need to convince those in the political process of the importance of the arts in general - and museums in particular - in the estimation of the ordinary Australian voter. I believe it can be done. Just before the Tasmanian State elections in 1989 the economists and journalists scoffed at the campaigns of the Greens. Yet the Greens proved closer to the concerns of the electorate. So it is, I believe, with the arts. The physical environment is but one aspect of the electorate's concern about the world in which we live. The cultural environment - of music, of knowledge, of arts and crafts, of film and the media - are all part of the environment. The politician who sees the coming wave of

the cultural environment as an issue in politics will truly reap political rewards. More importantly, that politician will be honoured by the generations that follow.

NATIONAL MUSEUM: A TREASUREHOUSE

The treasurehouse of our national civilization includes the National Museum of Australia. This exhibition which I launch is full of symbols. It is displayed at the National Convention Centre because the Museum has no present adequate facility of its own. It is displayed by temporary scaffolding which symbolises vividly the temporary features of the museum. In the display there is a clear juxtaposition between the artefacts and achievements of the Aboriginal people of the continent and those of the settlers who came later. It is an exhibition full of contrasts.

The idea of a national museum can be traced through the decades to a few enlightened people. It gained it impetus from the Piggott Report in 1975. That report suggested the introduction of tertiary studies relevant to museum science. This recommendation has been implemented. It also recommended the introduction of certain laws for the preservation of the national heritage. Laws have been passed. The most important recommendation for the conservation of the national collection has been, like the law in Hamlet's Denmark, honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

The Act establishing the National Museum was passed by Federal Parliament in 1980. The Museum's interim plan was

published in 1982 and the Fraser government set aside a splendid 88 hectare site on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin. From the first, the idea was to avoid a monumental building. Instead, in harmony with our country, the idea of pavilions, of the open air and of a new form of display were emphasised. It was the Hawke government in 1985 that gazetted the site for the museum. Its future seemed assured.

But then the heady days gave way to days of crisis. In 1986 recruitment of staff was stopped. In 1987 the Review of Museums took place. This led to the publication by the Department of Finance of its viewpoint "What Price Heritage?" Of course, that Department was right to point out that everything, including a museum, has a price. We must be conscious of the price and to be aware of the competing claims on scarce national resources. But the suggestion that the value of a national museum could be assessed by cost per visitor was fundamentally flawed. The object of a national museum is not confined to servicing visitors. It includes the collection, study, analysis of and publication about our heritage. Furthermore, upon the national obligation to perform these functions it is difficult to place an objective economic assessment and dollar value. There are some things that government in a civilized country simply must do.

In 1988 forces within the Government actually proposed the abolition of the National Museum and the distribution of its collection to State counterparts. Construction of the museum on the dedicated site was deferred. Fortunately, this

proposal was defeated in Cabinet - it is said by the timely intervention of Mr Keating, the Federal Treasurer.

In 1989 by the efforts of Minister Clyde Holding, an additional \$1 million was found for the Museum to bring its annual budget to \$3.7 million. Moreover, five precious new members of staff were found bringing the complement to thirty-five - a modest establishment for a national authority.

And so we reach 1990. The Museum has a special importance because of its emphasis on the Australian environment and on the contributions to it of the Aboriginal people and the more recent settlers. It is a new idea, being less concerned with bricks and mortar and more with the notion of bringing the collection to the people both in the physical environment of the institution to be built in Canberra and in the travelling exhibitions that are planned.

During the current election there has been little talk about the Museum. The 1988 Conference of the Australian Labor Party removed the commitment to the Museum from the Party Platform. Yet Mr Holding has firmly committed the Government to the creation of the Museum. Senator Puplick for the Coalition has also expressed his support

We should express the hope that the Museum has come through the valley of despair. Before the centenary of Federation in 2001 it may be hoped that a permanent facility will be operating, worthy of the name "The National Museum of Australia". In Washington the parade of museums that

attracts the thousands of tourists who visit their national capital provides an intellectual core for the true patriotism of the citizens of that country. The notion that Australia should be content with its present ramshackle arrangements, or that we cannot afford a national museum, is completely unacceptable. Perhaps in the changing world environment and with the glittering prospect of defence cuts, we can truly turn swords into ploughshares. In some little corner of the Museum, let us resolve to display the military toys that have cost so much, required such other sacrifices and which, no longer necessary, can be housed for a fascinated later generation in a museum that displays the memorabilia of each succeeding generation of Australia's national life.

THE THEMES OF THE EXHIBITION

It needs a Modest Moussourgsky to illustrate with music the four themes of this exposition. The first is the landscape and the environment. The impact of humanity upon the unique environment of the Great South Land has not always been beneficial. There is a contrast here between the impact of the Aboriginal people and that of the European settlers who followed. The boomerang of the Aboriginal is displayed side by side with the farm machinery of the early settlers. The particular features of the Australian farming scene, with its special difficulties, can be seen in some of the early fertilizing and harvesting equipment. Recreational use is illustrated by the collection from Miles Dunphy, the father of the national parks movement in Australia.

Secondly, there is the theme of improvisation. It can be observed from Walter Burley Griffin's "Knitlock" brickmaking machine, which he designed to empower working class Australians to build their own homes. The improvised products of the rural community and of the dedicated Australian explorers of Antarctica are displayed. Making do is not a uniquely Australian attribute. But the transported and transplanted settlers had to make a fine art of it, uprooted as they were from a culture which had itself sprung from a quite different environment, social and physical.

Thirdly, there is the theme of distance. The Cobb & Co coach illustrates the early way in which the distances of the continent were tamed. More recently the aircraft used by travelling health-workers and the Percival "Gull" aircraft show the special blessing of air transport for a country of continental size. The "Gull" is a particularly important symbol. It was in the forefront of aviation technology when it was developed in the 1930s. Like so many other Australian inventions it could not get the necessary support in Australia to convert it to a commercial proposition. It joins Barry Jones' long list of "might have beens": brilliant inventions, taken over by others, simply because Australians did not have the will, or the means, to follow through. The Aboriginal watercraft, memory sticks and paintings show their practical solutions to the tyranny of distance.

Fourthly, there is the theme of the challenge of the

future. The costumes of the early colonial gentry may seem anachronistic to some. Yet every day I enter my court in a wig and clothing not so different. The modern clothing style, the contemporary motor vehicle and the other symbols of present and future life stand in contrast to the original Holden car, the neat caravan of the 1950s and the outback visiting dentists' chair with its drill pedalled (as often as not) by the unfortunate patient.

CLEVER AND CIVILIZED

So this is the first exhibition. It is interesting. It is timely. It needs a good brochure to bring out the themes and to explain the links between them and the importance of having a national museum where these elements in Australia's national life can be collected, displayed and studied.

One of the most vivid phrases during the election has been the Prime Minister's policy speech assertion that Australia must move from being the "lucky country" to being the "clever country". It is fortunate that Mr Hawke had at his ear Professor Ralph Slatcher, chief government science adviser, to plant that notion in the fertile ground of the political process. May it take root and flourish.

What we now need is to plant another seed. Let us tell the Prime Minister - and other politicians - that Australia should not be content with being the lucky country. Nor even the clever country. It must be, as well, the civilized country. A country of culture. A country of the intellect.

Of music, painting, the arts. A country of museums. A country proud of its past and determined to rescue that past from oblivion, before it is too late.

Such is the message that should be sent out to all politicians - Labor and Liberal - Democrat and National - the Greens, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and, yes, even the Marijuana Party. Quality of life is the issue of politics for the 1990s. It is the duty of civilized people to get that message across to our political leaders.

That is why I was honoured to receive this invitation to open this exhibition. And to join with you on this sunny morning, as the sunlight of such a special quality of this land falls on the temporary scaffolding - on the exhibits here, old and new. And it is why I am glad to share this occasion with you my fellow citizens. Citizens of Australia. Citizens of a lucky country. Citizens of a clever country. Citizens of a civilized country.