

2139

DEFINING MOMENTS PROJECT
HAND-OVER REPORT OCTOBER 2006
Michael Kirby

**DEFINING MOMENTS PROJECT
HAND-OVER REPORT OCTOBER 2006**

Michael Kirby

As a private initiative, and as a joint project of the two sponsoring national statutory authorities, the Defining Moments Project is now concluded. It has been wholly handed over to the National Museum of Australia. This is a report to the earlier participants in the Project on the handover. Its aim is to allow those participants to close their files.

Initially the objective of the Defining Moments Committee was to raise private funds to sponsor a museum facility in the space presently leased by the National Capital Authority (NCA) to the National Portrait Gallery in Commonwealth Place, Canberra, when that space became available, expected in 2008.

Subsequently the difficulties and unpredictabilities of raising private funding led to the exploration of a joint venture with the National Museum of Australia (NMA). Eventually, by constructive discussions with the Chairman of the Council of the NMA (the Hon Tony Staley) and the Chief Executive of NMA (Mr Craddock Morton) an arrangement was reached for a joint project involving both NMA and the NCA. A Memorandum of Understanding was to be produced by NCA. Both statutory authorities approved the project in principle. A Joint Committee was created that involved a

restructuring of the original Defining Moments Committee. I was asked by the two Authorities to chair the Joint Committee, envisaged to last at least into the development phase, until the proposed museum facility in Commonwealth Place was up and running. Other members of the Joint Committee were Mr Michael Ball AM and Ms Annabelle Pegrum (for NCA) and the Hon Tony Staley, Dr John Hirst and Mr Craddock Morton (for NMA).

The Joint Committee had two agreeable and useful meetings. Everything appeared to be proceeding smoothly. However, at the last (second) meeting of the Joint Committee on 20 July 2006 in Canberra I was informed that difficulties had arisen in respect of unidentified items on the list of 100 Defining Moments approved by the original Committee and accepted, without contrary suggestions or proposals, by the distinguished historians to whom the original Committee had submitted the list. One of the items (the *Bringing Them Home* Report by Sir Ronald Wilson) was identified to me. No other item was at first named. I was told that these items, unless changed, might make it difficult to secure the agreement of the Council of the NMA. I was left guessing as to any items other than the Wilson Report.

Subsequently, I became aware that there was one other item and that it was the inclusion of the 1978 first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras which, until that time, had passed without comment and apparently been accepted on the list of 100 Defining

Moments proposed by the Defining Moments Committee and Joint Committee.

I was then informed that the final list had deleted these two items; that they were to be replaced by others (the Port Arthur Massacre with the Gun Buy Back and the Free Trade Agreement with the United States were mentioned). A substitute item in relation to homosexual rights, the 1975 South Australian reforms of anti-homosexual criminal laws, was proposed. I was told that these changes had been approved by the historians' sub-committee of the Joint Committee.

I indicated that these deletions, which were presented as *faits accomplis* in a list that had apparently already been discussed with the Minister responsible for the NMA, presented difficulties for me. On 3 October 2006, I explained those difficulties. They related both to the process of deletion and to the essential difference, as a Defining Moment, between a statutory change by one State Parliament and an event in which Australian homosexual citizens stood up for the first time for their own rights, and asserted those rights. That was how the original Mardi Gras was born on 24 June 1978 (see Craig Johnston and Paul van Reyk (eds) *Queer City - Gay and Lesbian Politics in Sydney* (2000), Pluto Press). I proposed that the matter be reconsidered by the sub-committee of historians. However, it appeared that this was not agreeable or would be futile.

Dr John Hirst, a member of the NMA Council and of the Joint Committee wrote to me on 30 October 2006 stating:

"My aim in making proposals for amendments was in your words to preserve the integrity of the list but make those minor adjustments that would secure support from the Museum Council and beyond them the Government which is being called on to provide the funds".

In light of this development, it appeared to me that attitudinal or political considerations had intruded into the Project that made it inappropriate for me to remain in the chair of the Joint Committee of the two Authorities.

I fully understood, and still do, the practical considerations that can affect political choices. However, it seemed inappropriate for me to be part of such considerations in relation to each of the deleted projects but especially the one concerned with a Defining Moment for Australian homosexuals.

I therefore indicated to Mr Michael Ball my intention to withdraw from the Project. He thereupon signified that the Joint Committee should be dissolved; the Project handed over entirely to the Council of the NMA; and the intellectual property in the Defining Moments concept (so far as it exists) also handed over to the NMA.

This seems a sensible outcome in all the circumstances. It recognises the *Realpolitik* of the position that has been arrived at. It places responsibility for the future of the Project, and the list of 100

Defining Moments, in those who have effective control over it. It obviates the necessity of a Joint Committee that no longer reflected the real dynamic of the Project. I therefore agreed that transfer of the Project in its entirety to the Council of the NMA was appropriate. The transfer has therefore occurred.

I will arrange for all of the papers in my Defining Moments Project files to be copied and copies provided to the Chief Executive of the NMA. Perhaps in years to come, when a Defining Moments Museum or facility in Commonwealth Place is established and the internet outreach is created, it may be of interest to future observers to know something of its history and how it came about, how it evolved, and how the list was altered and the project then transferred to the NMA.

I wish to express my thanks to all of my colleagues who, at various stages, took part in the Defining Moments Project. I hope that the ultimate enterprise will still be a success.

MICHAEL KIRBY

c Mr Michael Ball AM
Professor Geoffrey Blainey AC
Mr Danny Gilbert AM
Dr David Headon
Professor Marilyn Lake
Mr Craddock Morton
Mr Tom Moulton
Ms Annabelle Pegrum