

## Culture wars and the national museum

### EDITORIAL OPINION

*Age*

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The decision not to renew the director's contract needs an explanation.

The founding director of the National Museum of Australia, Dawn Casey, has completed her second term in the job. She will not get a third. The museum, on the shores of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin, is the first in Australia to be dedicated to social history. It has been a subject of political controversy throughout its own brief history, but it has also been extraordinarily popular with visitors. More than two million of them - an attendance considerably greater than expected - have walked through its doors in the two years and 10 months since they first opened. Few of Australia's major cultural institutions, even in Sydney and Melbourne with their much larger populations, can claim to have received so emphatic an endorsement by the public. And Ms Casey is known to have been disappointed that when her initial three-year term expired it was extended for only 12 months. So why is she not still the museum's director? The chairman of the museum's council, former Liberal Party federal president Tony Staley and Arts Minister Rod Kemp will not say, although Mr Staley managed to perpetuate the mystery by commenting that Ms Casey had "shown very good leadership indeed and she goes with our great goodwill".

Some of Ms Casey's supporters on the museum council, whose appointments have also not been renewed, might wonder just how much goodwill there has been. And other people who have spoken publicly in her defence, such as the Aboriginal activist and academic Mick Dodson, have attributed the decision not to renew the contract to a combination of racism and sexism. It may fairly be doubted whether her gender had anything to do with the decision, or whether her Aboriginality had anything directly to do with it. But there are grounds for suspecting that she is a victim of Australia's culture wars. Two members of the museum council, the Prime Minister's biographer, David Barnett, and his former speechwriter, Christopher Pearson, have reportedly been persistent critics of the museum's exhibits, and the gist of Mr Barnett's criticism, in particular, has been that the exhibits reflect the so-called "black armband" view of Australian history, and are insufficiently celebratory of the nation-building achievements of Australia's European settlers and their descendants.

A review of the museum's exhibits and public programs chaired by La Trobe university sociologist John Carroll, however, made no finding of systematic political bias, declaring only that some of the exhibits might be open to misinterpretation. And, it pointedly declared the First Australians gallery to be the most successful in the museum. In the light of the review's findings, and the public acclaim for the museum, it can only be concluded that it is Senator Kemp and Mr Staley who have some explaining to do, not Ms Casey.