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## Going down in history

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*Citing political interference, outgoing National Museum director Dawn Casey hits back at her critics. Georgina Safe reports*

AT 10am today, more than 100 staff at the National Museum of Australia will tuck into homemade cakes and biscuits at a private send-off for their outgoing director Dawn Casey.

"There will be everyone from cleaners to curators and more than a few tears," says one staff member. "It's going to be an emotional occasion."

Casey finishes her term on Friday. The Howard Government did not renew her three-year contract last November, instead giving her only a further 12 months in the job. Her replacement has yet to be announced.

Casey's term at the \$150 million Canberra institution that opened in March 2001 has been contentious, marked by debate about whether the NMA's displays are too sympathetic to the "black armband" view of history.

The controversy culminated in the July release of a federal government-appointed review of exhibitions and content at the NMA by Melbourne sociologist John Carroll. The review found that there had been notable omissions in the museum's overview of Australian history, but no systematic bias. It nonetheless called for a \$45 million overhaul of contentious exhibitions and galleries at the embattled institution.

As the head of the institution at the centre of the country's culture wars, Casey has kept a remarkable cool. In the eye of the storm around the calm waters of Lake Burley Griffin, she has refused to respond publicly to even the most vociferous of criticism. Until now.

Yesterday she launched an extraordinary attack on her critics, accusing them of overt political interference and a whispering campaign designed to undermine her authority.

"I'd call them would-be cultural commandos," Casey told the ABC.

John Howard's former speechwriter Christopher Pearson and the Prime Minister's biographer David Barnett were among the NMA councillors singled out by Casey for regularly leaking opinions about the NMA to newspapers and other media outlets.

“There were a number of occasions where I received calls from journalists saying they had been informed of certain museum matters, particularly in areas criticising aspects of the organisation, by board members,” she told *The Australian* yesterday.

Direct representations were also made to the Prime Minister’s office and other key government stakeholders by councillors unhappy with the NMA’s direction under Casey.

“Comments were made in Parliament House to various ministers,” she says.

Casey says she had always expected -- and indeed welcomed -- robust debate about the role of the museum, but that it had degenerated into counterproductive ideological warfare.

“We’re caught up in the history wars,” she says. “The debate around the NMA hasn’t been free from political interference ... that’s the problem.”

But review chairman Carroll denies debate about the museum has been overly politicised. “If Dawn Casey had actually been listening to some of the history war discussions, she would have heard the debate has opened up new areas of consensus ... it sounds like she hasn’t been listening to what’s been happening since the report came out,” Carroll says.

Nonetheless, three board members who backed Casey for a further three years -- Marcus Besen, Sharon Brown and Ron Webb -- left the council in October after they, too, were not appointed for a second term.

That same month, religious broadcaster John Fleming and conservative historian John Hirst were inducted, and those associated with the conservative faction, including Pearson and Barnett, had their terms extended.

Casey says the boards of cultural institutions should be seen to be free from political bias, adding there is a perception that the chairman of the museum, former Liberal Party president Tony Staley, has not been independent because of his political links.

“Tony Staley is a wonderful chairman, but the perception was that here he is, part of the Liberal Party,” she says.

“I just think that if you’re involved in a political party, whether it be Liberal or Labor, you’d work out what your priorities are given your range of issues that you had to deal with as a party person.”

That the relationship between council, politics and policy will remain a key issue for the incoming director is borne out in the job specification, a copy of which has been obtained by *The Australian*.

“The appointee is accountable to the Council of the National Museum of Australia, who are in turn accountable to the Government,” the specification says. “Any candidate should have a detailed understanding of the issues facing the public sector and be able to operate within the broader government context.”

Casey is calling for new legislation to limit the ability of politically appointed boards of Australia's cultural institutions to determine their content and daily operations.

"There needs to be much more transparency in terms of board members being there for strategic overview and guidance on financial matters, and not to get into the level of detail of what the labels or content of exhibitions are," she says.

"No political party in power should [appoint board members] who are currently associated with the operations of a political party."

Staley says such measures are unnecessary, arguing his board already contains strongly independent thinkers.

"People have their views and they're entitled to express their views," he says. "Board members ought to be selected for what they bring to the board, and you need a good mixture of skills [and] people coming from different areas."

The Australian understands that negotiations with the Government's preferred candidate for new NMA director, Australian War Memorial director Steve Gower, broke down irretrievably last month. The Government had to advertise the post, to be appointed by junior Arts Minister Rod Kemp, only eight days ago. Global head-hunting agency TNP Hudson is handling the process. A spokeswoman for Kemp says an acting director will be announced "in the near future" -- which will leave the NMA rudderless after this week.

"The uncertainty does have some impact on morale within the museum," says Casey. "I have been seeking advice on who the caretaker will be, so the staff can feel settled, but we have no idea [who that will be]."

And Casey has no idea what she will be doing next year, beyond a sprinkling of official engagements and a five-week break over Christmas.

"I haven't been very good at switching off from this job ... there has never been a quiet moment," she says.

That moment is about to arrive: Casey says she will not reapply for her post.

"It has been made perfectly obvious that there would be no point in my applying for the position," she says.

Liberal City of Sydney councillor Kathryn Greiner says Casey, an indigenous Australian, would not have lost it in the first place if she were a white man.

"It would not happen to a white Anglo-Saxon male," Greiner told the ABC yesterday.

The Australian understands Casey was offered a position within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, but declined the government offer because her strengths and passions lie in the museums sector.

Like her staff, Casey is emotional about her departure. "I am feeling sad," she says. "But the staff have been wonderful ... together we have achieved extraordinary

things.”

The NMA has attracted more than 2million visitors since it opened 2 1/2 years ago. Its shop has an annual turnover of \$1 million plus and this year is expected to record a 7 per cent profit.

## **SITUATION VACANT**

\* Role of the director: “The director plays a leading role in implementing the strategic directions for the museum, as identified by the council ...”

\* Key duties: “Manage the affairs, programs and activities of the museum in accordance with the National Museum of Australia Act 1980 and subject to the directions of, and in accordance with, policies determined by the council.”

\* Key performance indicators: “Provide effective support to the National Museum of Australia Council.”

Relevant experience: “Any candidate should have a detailed understanding of the issues facing the public sector and be able to operate within the broader government context.”

Qualifications: “Appropriate tertiary qualifications, although not mandatory, will be well regarded.”

*(Extract from the candidate information document, marked strictly confidential)*

## **THE CRITICS**

### **WHAT THEY’VE SAID**

”I think for too long our history has been ignored and perhaps a particular version of our history has been promoted to dominate other views”

*Arts Minister Rod Kemp*

”[The museum is] a repository of nothing more than the intellectual poverty of the tertiary-educated middle class of the post-Vietnam War era”

*Historian Keith Windschuttle*

”The NMA is short on compelling narratives, engagingly presented dramatic realisations of important events and themes in the Australian story”

*The review into the National Museum of Australia, July*

”Fundamental changes are required to address its weaknesses ... the NMA is not world class”

*Review panel chairman John Carroll*

"It is no secret that I personally believe we need to devote more attention to the research and collection aspects of our charter"

*NMA council member Christopher Pearson*

## **THE SUPPORTERS**

"[Dawn Casey] was a remarkable find for the museum, [which] couldn't have hoped to locate so many qualities, including managerial skills, an appreciation of ethical and historical complexities, and the ability to instil confidence in her staff and her major constituents"

*South Australian Museum curator Philip Jones*

"One of the finest museum directors working in the world today - full stop. I know and work with many of them, and find [Dawn Casey] equal to the best. Humane, honourable, politically nuanced, hard-nosed and high-minded in equal measure"

*International museums consultant Elaine Gurian*