

Opinion

Indigenous memorial must recognise dispossession did not end violence



Brendan Nelson, former director of the Australian War Memorial speaking at a wreath laying ceremony at the memorial.

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In Jane Austen's final completed novel, *Persuasion*, Henrietta Musgrove says of Lady Russell, "I always look upon her as able to persuade a person to any thing! I am afraid of her ... quite afraid of her, because she is so very clever".

Like Austen, Brendan Nelson understands persuasion very well. Anyone who has witnessed him speaking at length will know the seductive quality of a man who can demonstrate such impressive recall.

As a former union leader, government minister, ambassador, leader of the opposition and, more recently, director of the Australian War Memorial, he is undoubtedly a clever man.

But his latest proposal reported in *The Age* on Tuesday for a "tomb of the unknown custodians" to be built in Canberra, between Lake Burley Griffin and Old Parliament House, falls short of being called a clever idea.

It deserves much closer scrutiny, principally because it reduces our view of the past to one that reflects colonial structures of power and domination.

Dr Nelson's proposal also deflects from the ongoing question of how the War Memorial interprets frontier violence in the colonisation of this country.

This is a matter that deserves much greater public scrutiny, given that the memorial is currently undergoing a \$500 million renovation and extension, announced in 2018, the year before Dr Nelson retired as director.

Despite that record allocation, the memorial's refit will concentrate on its post-1945 galleries.

The heavily chronological focus of the memorial's galleries creates the impression that colonial violence is something that ended with the frontier wars of dispossession. In other words, they were a series of events which ended at a particular point in time.

Dr Nelson's language reflects this view, even in his expressed desire for the tomb to become a centre of solemn commemoration on 26 January.



Redevelopment of the memorial has begun. Despite that record allocation, the refit will focus the post-1945 galleries.

As the *Age* reported him saying, "It needs to be a day that begins with solemnity ... around the reflection upon and celebration of Aboriginal life, history and culture, and

the impact those events of Arthur Phillip arriving on the 26th of January had on Indigenous people”.

Note the way he uses the word “impact”: it is passive. It invites the view that acts of colonial violence are no one’s responsibility, and that their “impact” can be styled in the past tense.

But we know this is not the case.

Colonialism established a structure of violence that is centred on domination and control, of people, land, water, language and sovereignty.

Colonialism never ended with the frontier wars, or with the federation of the colonies. Instead, it became internalised by the colonised as guilt and shame, and by colonisers as anger and racism.

It rattles down through generations and finds expression in families and other institutions, in law, policing, in record levels of incarceration and deaths in custody.

Would we be prepared to commemorate an unknown custodian who died in custody? I doubt it.

So, what might be done instead?

Dr Nelson could rethink his idea and take-up the invitation made to all Australians in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, for this nation to enshrine an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the constitution and to begin a process of truth-telling about the past, called Makarrata.

The Statement from the Heart is a gift to this nation and its best chance yet of creating a new, shared sovereignty in an Australian republic.

It gives us a chance to properly listen, learn and reckon with the ways that the past impinges on the present in a manner that Nelson’s proposal never will.

Historian Mark McKenna took up this very point in 2018, writing after the release of the Uluru Statement the previous year: “Australia stands at a crossroads – we either *make* the commonwealth stronger and more complete through an honest reckoning with the past, or we *unmake* the nation by clinging to triumphant narratives in which the violence inherent in the nation’s foundation is trivialised”.

Where Nelson’s great rival, Malcolm Turnbull, rejected the Uluru Statement out of hand, publicly advocating for it now will go much further than a tomb will towards advancing reconciliation and a more mature understanding of this country’s past.