

# **Making Policy Practice Previous Possessions New Obligations In Western Australian Community Museums**

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By Janey Dolan

On International Museums Day in 1993 the statement of principles for a policy document entitled *Previous Possessions New Obligations: policies for museums in Australia and Aboriginal people* was launched by the Council of Australian Museum Associations (CAMA). *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was both a product of, and a catalyst for, fundamental changes in philosophy and practice in the Australian museum industry. Its launch in 1993 is significant, because it became one of several key events in that year to have had ongoing influence on the future of museums in Australia. There are three particular influences which, combined, resulted not only in the policy document but also in important cultural shifts in the industry. These influential factors were the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, the development of a new single professional association for Australian museums — Museums Australia Inc. — and a political and cultural climate which embraced the development and use of policy as a tool for change in cultural institutions. Underlying these particular contexts was also a history of difficult and inequitable relations between indigenous people and museums.

For the entirety of its colonial history, Australia has been a site of migrations and cross-cultural encounters, experienced and observed by Australia's indigenous peoples. The social and economic implications of these migrations are many and include the introduction of the notion of museums as a part of the fabric of Australian cultural life. The dispossession of land and culture from indigenous Australians is both recorded in, and was to a certain extent facilitated by, the introduced museum culture (Griffiths 1996: 9-100). At its most extreme, Aboriginal people lost their lives, both literally or effectively in order to appear in museums

as exhibits. At the very least, encounters with museum culture resulted in the inequity of indigenous Australian cultures being either entirely absent from, or alternatively, presented in museums without the knowledge, consent or voice of those people themselves. While Aboriginal people have not continued to lose their lives for the use of museums, they have suffered substantial misrepresentations in museum exhibitions. In certain sectors of the museum industry, they continue to do so today.

In the latter half of the twentieth century there has been a strong move towards democratic and representative modes of museum practice. Indigenous people have been empowered and influential in this move. By the end of the 1980s a few major Australian museums, including The South Australian Museum, the Australian Museum and the Museum of Victoria had completely revised their approaches to the use of indigenous cultural heritage in favour of working in close collaboration with the indigenous Australians whose material they held. By 1993, still more had done so.

The development and launch of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was framed historically and staged publicly by the fact that 1993 was the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. It provided an internationally high profile space in which indigenous people could articulate their need for control over and recognition of the importance of keeping their cultural practices living, rather than losing them to the past. In terms of general museological practice, the contemporary move to better address indigenous cultures is echoed in calls for fairer representations of broader cultural and community groups as well. This climate is highlighted in the pages of standard museological texts such as *Museums and Communities: the politics of public culture* (Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992) and *Exhibiting Culture: The poetics and politics of museum display* (Karp & Lavine 1991). In Australia, there is increasing realisation that cultural diversity is a fact of life and that the cultures of the larger Australian community constitute elements far more complex than mere differences of ethnicity. This

realisation has underpinned moves by museums to reinvent themselves in order to attract wider and more culturally diverse groups of users.

*Previous Possessions New Obligations* was introduced to the wider Australian museum community at a time when key public museums throughout the country were attempting and promoting new approaches to their holdings of Aboriginal cultural material. Influential people in these museums were also influential in the creation and development of the single professional association for Australian museums, Museums Australia Inc. which was launched in 1993. It adopted *Previous Possessions New Obligations* as its own document, using it as a ground breaking advocacy tool.

The formation of Museums Australia Inc. joined together previously disparate and autonomous museum's associations with the intention of creating a stronger, more influential resource and advocacy body of a national scale (Griffin 1992: 5). The new membership structure was inclusive of all types of museums from visual arts and social history through to science, government and community based museums, staffed both by museum professionals and volunteers. With a new collaborative structure and the intention of a more professional approach to the museum industry, the creation of national policies and guidelines for practice also became a direction for Museums Australia Inc. Through this approach, *Previous Possessions New Obligations* became a symbol of Museums Australia Inc.'s professionalism and contemporariness. In this way the document advocated culturally sensitive approaches to museum work, while representing Museums Australia Inc. as a unified and powerful force of change (Anderson, C. 1998, pers. comm., 16 March).

That Museums Australia Inc. chose a policy document to be one of its first public position statements is significant. The need to address inequities in the representation of indigenous people in museums appears within the broader context of addressing other similarly misrepresented or un(der) represented cultural groups. An important response to

such inequities in Australian museums has been the development by individual museums, as well as Museums Australia Inc., of policy recommendations and guidelines to implement best practices in the area of community cultural diversity. This was the case with *Previous Possessions New Obligations*, which can be placed within a growing culture of policy making as a means by which to initiate and create change in public cultural institutions.

At the time *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was taking shape, the Keating government was also working on Australia's first national cultural policy, *Creative Nation* (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). This document expressed the Keating government's acknowledgment of the significant role of Australian community culture and cultural institutions and bodies, in a high profile context. *Creative Nation* exemplifies the role of policy development as outlined by Tony Bennett who notes that rather than being in opposition to each other, effective cultural policy development needs to be the marrying of community and governmental modes of practice and theory (Bennett 1998: 203).

The contemporary version of the museum presented by Tony Bennett (1995, 1998) and James Clifford (1997) is that of civic pedagogy. Policy development in the areas of cultural representation and community enrichment fall heavily into this area. They place museums into the key point of information transmission between different cultural communities. In order to hold this role, museums must work within governmental principles of objectivity and democracy. After all *Creative Nation* highlighted the idea that 'democracy is the key to cultural value'. Yet we will see that democracy has been proven hard to achieve at the level of small community representation.

The aims of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* were to demonstrate specific areas of change in practice, thereby facilitating broader change in museums throughout Australia. They were developed to provide benchmarks for best practice in museums dealing with indigenous cultural heritage. The document was introduced to members and the broader

museum sector alike with the following statements of purpose: ‘This policy intends to help forge new partnerships in Australia between museums and the first peoples of Australia.’

(CAMA 1993: 1.) And;

The principles and detailed policies in this document are intended to guide museums in framing their own procedures for dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultural heritage (CAMA 1993: 3).

It was later given a specific reconciliation context:

It has been a significant achievement by Museums Australia Inc. to have developed and implemented *Previous Possessions New Obligations* as a national guideline and policy. Reconciliation is a national program and the policy document, *Previous Possessions New Obligations* affects all museums, large and small, regional and state (Pearce 1997: 18).

Since its launch, *Previous Possessions New Obligations* continues to undergo review and some modification in presentation, if not content. After five years it is fair to say that its impact on museum practice across the sector had been uneven, with some very significant achievements and some equally large voids in actual change. The practical impact of the policy had been greatest in the museums which, largely by virtue of their legislated existence, are under an obligation to be culturally sensitive in the way in which they represent indigenous Australians. In the case of smaller scale museums there has been a more limited adoption of the policy objectives. In many more member museums though, *Previous Possessions New Obligations* has had little or no direct impact on their practice. Indeed, a 1998 Museums Australia (WA) Reconciliation Working Party survey of members’ use of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* highlighted a generally poor level of awareness of the document’s very existence.

The dissertation for my Masters of Cultural Heritage (Dolan 2000), focused on issues surrounding the limited impact of national policy initiatives in local, regional and specialist community based museums. *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was my case study and Western Australia was its focus location. Of the several hundred museums throughout that state, nearly 200 are linked to Museums Australia Inc. through institutional or individual

memberships. By having this link they have access to and, *in theory*, have chosen through affiliation, a moral obligation to follow the policy initiatives of the association. A review of the 1998 survey results highlighted that a majority of Western Australian museums do not consider the Aboriginal history of their area as appropriate material for their museums. Clearly this showed that the document's acceptance amongst this membership had been low. This issue became a focus of this study because of the discrepancy it highlights between Museums Australia Inc.'s expectations about its membership and the expectations of many of the members regarding their professional association and its initiatives. What does this mean for the organisation, the members, and especially the policy documents produced, that all these people pay for membership yet shirk, or don't respond to the policy initiatives directions of the organisation?

The mixed response to *Previous Possessions New Obligations* can be linked to specific contexts in the form and content of the policy, as well as the cultures of the Australian museum community into which it has been introduced. The most important of these contexts is Museums Australia Inc.'s strength and influence in the area of policy development. Museums Australia Inc. claims peak professional body status within the Australian museum industry. However, membership and participation in the organisation is voluntary. This creates a difficulty for policy developers, as members are under no obligation to conduct their business within the organisation's guidelines. Because Museums Australia Inc. is only empowered to make policies to the extent that they can be unenforceable recommendations or guidelines for practice, its documents are limited to being tools for advocacy. However, the strength of a policy as an advocacy tool is necessarily linked to its success in tangible application. This greatly increases the need for Museums Australia Inc. to develop policy documents in a manner that is truly reflective of their membership and readily

applicable in all museums if they are to have far reaching impact. It would appear this is where *Previous Possessions New Obligations* has not achieved its full potential.

The following sections of this article look at some reasons why this has been the case. It is a summary of issues arising from my primary research, considering the practical application of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in local, regional and specialist museums, which I shall henceforth refer to as *community museums*. This information was drawn from interviews with museum workers in Western Australian community museums. They were selected in order to be representative of social history museums fulfilling important community roles and delivering these through volunteer, local and state government run institutions. For the purpose of this article the interviewees will remain anonymous.

Arising from the interviewees' comments are a series of recommendations aimed at making future policy work in this area a more effective tool for a voluntary membership organisation wishing to implement practical change throughout the sector. The implications of such an aim would be the better application of this document and the more effective development of future policy for related areas of museum practice.

## **Issues arising**

That the complex historical and contemporary context of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* would impact on its reception and application is immediately visible in a selection of literature published at and around the time of the document's launch. A preliminary review of such literature, focusing on material published about *Previous Possessions New Obligations* and contemporary treatment of indigenous cultural material in Australian museums, led to the conclusion that the document had under-impacted in a very significant area of the museums industry, and therefore amongst Museums Australia

membership — community museums, particularly in regional areas. The implications of this are significant for an advocacy and policy-making organisation, whose membership includes a high proportion of community, local and regional museums.

The final version of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was circulated with some attachments including feedback provided during the drafting stages. Amongst these largely supportive comments were a number expressing concern about the likely problems of applicability of the document to small museums, particularly those working at the community level. These have proven to be of enduring significance to this critical appraisal of the document's effectiveness.

The other comments of particular note were written in February 1994 by Gaye Sculthorpe who was listed as a member of the policy's official development committee along with Christopher Anderson (South Australian Museum) Wally Caruana (National Gallery of Australia), Julia Clarke (Western Australian Museum), Karen Coote (Australian Museum), Des Griffin (Australian Museum, and president of CAMA), Bill Jonas (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), Andrew Reeves (Museum of Victoria), Richard Robins (Queensland Museum), and Ted Wilkes (Western Australian Museum Trustee) (CAMA 1993: 22). Sculthorpe published an article in *Museum National* entitled 'Indigenous Museums — on the margins?' In this article Sculthorpe (1994) discussed the changing nature of relations between indigenous people and Australian museums and the complexities entailed in negotiating these new relationships. She also highlighted that the shortcoming of much of the debate about policy in the area is its concentration on major museums. The article also flagged as problematic, the way policy developments tend to overlook smaller organisations and the role of indigenous museums, and make often incorrect assumptions regarding the progressiveness of larger institutions (Sculthorpe 1994: 7-8).

The original version of the policy stated that it would be subject to review in 1995. In the November 1996 issue of *Museum National*, Trevor Pearce, then Museum Australia's Project Officer for Museums and Indigenous People, published an article about the review process used for the policy. This highlighted some problem areas, including the low response rate from Aboriginal communities. He notes that this review stage led to the development and subsequent publication of the plain English summary of policies in 1996 (Pearce 1996: 5). Its release was further motivated by some of the issues flagged in Sculthorpe's article. This second version used the same policy guidelines and directives of the original but placed them into the context of a number of case studies, illustrating where the document had been successfully applied to practice. These case studies all featured large institutions.

In summary, the following issues became apparent in the literature on the subject, and endured to re-appear in interviews with the six institutions selected for formal interview as part of my study:

- The final policy had been the catalyst and reference tool for some very significant changes in Australian museums, at an almost exclusively state and national level;
- Aboriginal and other small local and community museums and collections have had a much lower rate of response to the document and the actions it espouses;
- The development of a second 'plain English' version of the document featuring case studies was required in order to make it accessible to Aboriginal (and other) communities;
- The consultation phase for the document appeared not to have sufficiently allowed for full contribution by all stakeholding parties and was limited in its scope;
- The all-encompassing mission of the newly amalgamated Museums Australia Inc. had not been clearly reflected in the association's policy documents;

- The development of the policy had been overseen and driven primarily by a small number of individuals from large, public, city based museums or galleries.

A major hypothesis arising from these factors, is that issues pertaining to the use of language and the making of incorrect assumptions regarding the ability of smaller museums to carry out such a high impact policy, in addition to issues of ownership of the document, may all be strongly influential factors impacting on the adoption and application of the principles and recommendations of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in community museums.

That there needed to be a second, 'plain English' version of the policy document in order to make it more accessible to Aboriginal people indicated that language and pitch were areas requiring attention. The lack of impact of that plain English version on the practices of the wider museum community shows that the communication and applicability problems remained unsolved.

Published articles and primary research indicate that there was no systematic formal representation of community museums in the development process of *Previous Possessions New Obligations*. Had there been such representation, or an increased level of consultation, what contribution might have been made by these types of museums? Could the issues pertaining to this sector have been more effectively addressed pre-emptively? The interviews conducted in the process of this research served to highlight specific issues that are of significance to policy developments that impact on community museums. These are:

### ***Previous Possessions New Obligations and Community Museum Culture***

Community museum culture is a culture of practice that should be considered when developing documents and policy guidelines that might reasonably be sought as resources by such museums. It is an identifiable and recognised thing not necessarily governed by best

practice or cultural diversity or access equity (McMichael 1991). It is entirely inappropriate to assume such museums have either the desire or the ability to voluntarily adapt to other, more contemporary or 'professional' modes of practice.

### **Political climates — Political Correctness**

*Previous Possessions New Obligations* arose out of a time of change in political climate and became an encapsulation of principles for a reconciliatory process between museums and Aboriginal communities. It was through willing participation in this changing environment that the document was introduced and endorsed by Museums Australia Inc. and accepted by the professional museum sector (Pearce 1997: 16-18). As appropriate and logical as multiculturalism, reconciliation, and positive discrimination might seem in a professional sector whose practice is largely framed by public cultural policies, these are not political positions widely supported in regional, and many other communities, particularly in relation to indigenous issues.

Community, local and special interest museums are territorial by nature, both in relation to their collections and their interpretations. Owing to their position outside the parameters of public cultural policy, they are not subject to the same forces as public institutions. For this reason they are more likely to reflect on a small section of the community's perception of itself, rather than broader relationships and interpretations of history. Community museums are not places prone to or known for attention to equity of access, or politically appropriate interpretation of collections.

Two main issues prevail — the realities of racial tension and the implications of political correctness. While *Previous Possessions New Obligations* speaks of the long overdue need to redress past injustices and cultural damage as perpetrated by museums, regional museum workers are making comments highlighting the disparity between the ideals of the

policy document and the realities of life in complex regional communities. For example, a Kalgoorlie interviewee made the following comment:

Kalgoorlie is a town that is exceedingly racist. There is a lot of hatred of Aboriginal people. It's a difficult town to encourage people to think kindly of Aboriginal people... (Interviewee 1, January 1998, pers. comm.).

An Albany museum worker said the following:

In twenty years the relationships [between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities] have certainly gone downhill... Now you've got this 'we're Aboriginals, we're different', not we're Australian we're all the same. (Interviewee 2, July 1998, pers. comm.)

The notion of deteriorating relations was repeated. This was clearly linked to a discomfort with the perceived obligation to be 'politically correct' with regard to indigenous issues. Again the Albany interviewee said

Aboriginals are definitely not top of the pops in most places... There was one lady I was talking to and someone came and asked her if they could do an Aboriginal history or something and she said 'I don't want anything to do with that!' It's a reaction from all this think police and all the rest of it (Interviewee 2, July 1998, pers. comm.).

Museums Australia Inc. was identified on a number of occasions as potentially being a part of this so-called 'think police'. The Association's assumption of a policy development role underpinned this perception. Indeed, it was suggested that the misunderstood threat that Museums Australia Inc. would police museum practice in its policy areas, may be a factor in community museum inactivity in the area of indigenous cultural representation:

Political correctness, that's what you are scared of. I don't think people are worried about the Aboriginal people being offended, they are worried about the political [implications]. Somebody, say, from Museums Australia saying 'You can't write that.' Things we used to write quite happily are now offensive, or deemed offensive, by the whites... They only have to get someone uptight once and they will never do another label (Interviewee 2, July 1998, pers. comm.).

Evidently communities and community museum workers need explanations and education about interpretation, access, equity and community cultural representation issues before being confronted by completed policy documents that assume a base level of existing understanding. Clearly the assumption that all museums and communities want, or feel

obligated to address issues of inappropriate representation and reconciliation in their museums is at odds with reality in many cases.

## **Repatriation and The Fear of Loss**

Concern regarding the care of objects remains, in most cases the key priority for community museums. Accordingly they feel threatened by the prospect of being told what to do with their objects, and about the risk of losing them. This was an issue raised by a local government museum worker who said ‘They are afraid that someone will steal their objects’ (Interviewee 3, May 1998, pers. comm.).

*Previous Possessions New Obligations* originally arose out of discussions about the inappropriate use of human remains and secret and sacred material in Australian museums. This is unquestionably its area of greatest impact. In Western Australia, at the time the document was presented to the museum community, there had been ongoing work by the Western Australian, Berndt and other museums, encouraging removal from exhibition and the repatriation or relocation of sensitive indigenous materials from all manner of museums and other organisations in Western Australia (Stanton, J. 1998, pers. comm. 30 April). People were having material taken away. Indeed, Sarah Murphy spoke of this in her paper to the 1990 CAMA conference, *The Relationship between state/nations museums and regional museums: The Western Australian Experience*. Speaking from the position of the Local Museum Coordinator, on the staff of the Western Australian Museum, she said that, ‘The Western Australian Museum is perceived in some quarters as a big brother coming to find objects for its own collection’ (Murphy 1991: 287). In such a context a policy apparently dictating practices in such a sensitive area may well have reinforced a climate of fear of loss at the hands of an overarching organisation.

Indeed one interviewee said almost as much in her interview. At the time she took up the role of volunteer curator of a regional historical society in 1994, there was a fear about the implications of holding Aboriginal material:

They wouldn't talk much about it' [their holdings of Aboriginal material] and people would say 'you've got Aboriginal stuff, they're out to get you now' (Interviewee 4, July 1998, pers. comm.).

## **Museum Speak**

Another way in which the fundamental cultural and structural differences between community and so called professional museums and their approach to many aspects of their practice are not reflected in *Previous Possessions New Obligations* is in the use of language. Several interviewees commented on the use of alienating language as well as assumptions about modes of practice that are embedded in the policy. It has been noted that in the case of the indigenous community, the original use of specialist museological terminology led to the plain English version of the policy. Even with this purportedly more accessible document, I collected numerous comments regarding the use of language in *Previous Possessions New Obligations*.

A local government museum worker made the following comment on the probable reception of policy documents like *Previous Possessions New Obligations* by volunteer museums:

There is this resistance to reading anything thicker than two sheets of paper, and you can't put an in depth policy on two sheets of paper... They need to look at not having too many words on the page, having simple but not insultingly simple language and short... If they feel stupid, they'll do the wrong thing, so they just ignore it. They've got on OK up till now (Interviewee 3, May 1998, pers. comm.).

A volunteer curator in a regional historical society museum made a further point that in regional communities where the level of education tends to be lower, the feeling of threat and fear of potential humiliation is more pronounced:

There are people out there doing museums who finished school in grade seven. It is not fair to throw them something like that. It would be intimidating, you'd think you were going to be maybe financially liable so you [say you] never saw it, you never got it, you don't know nothing about it. And then they hide things in the back cupboard and hope nobody else finds it until they are gone (Interviewee 4, July 1998, pers. comm.).

Another regional interviewee made the further point that inclusion of the reader is the greater part of the success of something like a policy document, supposing that,

ninety percent of them wouldn't even read it if it came in the mail... It's just writing. It's too big. It has no meaning at the local level. It's all long words that you can't relate to. Some of these policy documents are very difficult to understand (Interviewee 2, July 1998, pers. comm.).

These comments are, no doubt, of equal relevance to Aboriginal community groups.

One can only suppose that a more penetrating attempt at consultation with this sector would have emphasised the importance of these very simple issues, well before it became evident that a second version of the document was required in plain English.

## **Grass Roots Action versus Governmental Policy**

The changing of community perceptions and the modification of personal actions are all things that naturally start at a community, or 'grass roots' level and then flow into the wider community. While outcomes arising from governmental policies may influence the speed of community museum uptake, the will to change ultimately lies with the general community.

The turn against political correctness and positive discrimination is best illustrated in Australia by the emergence, and continued support, of the One Nation political party. This group gained support for its stand against these very fundamental notions of contemporary Australian policies of governance. On the other side of politics, the strength of grass roots activity is behind the construction and promotion of the Australian movement for reconciliation as a 'people's movement'.

Community and local museums are clearly situated closest to the grass roots. Indeed, in one isolated regional museum I visited, positive activities conducted by the museum have

been at the centre of turning around negative community opinions about Aboriginal people, their history and culture (Interviewee 5, July 1998, pers. comm). By not acknowledging and addressing the powerful grass roots role of community museums, *Previous Possessions New Obligations* fails to utilise the influence of this as a tool for changing basic practices from the community up. This omission appears to be at the root of difficulties hindering the reception and application of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in the very places where attitudinal and practical change is necessary and has proven to be achievable under the right circumstances.

### **Recommendations – Making Museum Policies More Effective**

The research referred to in this article has brought to light a range of problematic issues associated with *Previous Possessions New Obligations*. It would also appear that some of the inhibiting issues experienced with *Previous Possessions New Obligations* have the potential to be replicated in the application phases of subsequent policies. In order to make a positive contribution to the area of cultural policy development I have developed a number of recommendations which address practical and communication issues relevant to the future of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* specifically and Museums Australia Inc. policy in general. A summary of these recommendations follows.

#### **Policy's Purpose**

There is a level of confusion amongst community museums as to the nature and expectations entailed in a Museums Australia policy document and the association's power of enforcement of these. In order to facilitate far-reaching changes, the association needs to strive to clarify this amongst its members.

Out of a process of consultation and clarification Museums Australia Inc. could also make it clearer to members how policy developments will impact on them. If members were given this information, it would make it easier for them to recognise the difference between policies of advocacy and policies for practical change. Importantly it would avoid the belittling of community museum members who feel inadequate as a result of being unable to understand or implement advocacy focused policies that are predominantly not intended for them.

### **Acknowledging the Cultural Diversity of Australian Museums**

A Museums Australia Inc. initiative providing appropriate links to policy for the full breadth of the museum sector would be reflected in greater support and increased participation from these members.

Community museums exist for a range of reasons, and the fulfilment of best professional practice is but one element which is often of lesser actual significance than being key community agents, engaging in specific practices of local importance (McMichael 1991: 41). Policy initiatives that require a move away from such characteristics need to reflect an understanding of the scale of the shift needed when expecting community museums to professionalise their practices, a point supported by Witcomb and Mauldon in the article *Local Museums and Cultural Policy: Reforming Local Museums?* (Witcomb & Mauldon 1996).

Clearly there is a need for a more effective level of communication and understanding between Museums Australia Inc. and its members in order to make policy documents both relevant and accessible to the broadest cross section of the industry. The regional interviewee who described the perception of Museums Australia Inc. policy as having ‘...no meaning at the local level...’ and ‘...not tied to anything’ (Interviewee 2, July 1998, pers. comm.) was

making the point that such irrelevance undermines both the policy documents and the association itself. A dormant policy is more of a liability than an advocacy tool.

While it is necessary to develop policy that addresses the diversity of circumstances of the museum sector, making and reflecting assumptions about any element of the museums community in policy means treading a fine line between being facile and condescending and being overwhelming and intimidating. A weakness of the original version of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* was the assumptions it made about the level of common understanding and accord regarding its core principles. This assumption has repeatedly proven unjustified.

### **Understanding and Facilitating the Challenges of Change**

It is a well-known fact that many people fear change. A curator of a local government museum said that,

What's missing [from *Previous Possessions New Obligations*] is a recognition that change is loss. And when you implement a whole new radical philosophy, someone is going to hurt (Interviewee 6, March 1998, pers. comm.).

Given this type of reality it is crucial that the language of policy documents is positive and that the outcomes are presented as being sufficiently desirable as to merit changes and risks.

An emphasis on the development of strong positive relations between Aboriginal communities and community museums would explain how this goes a long way towards avoiding conflict and trouble should potential difficulties arise in the interpretation of material. This would lend practical support to the more philosophical arguments as well as tangibly highlight benefits resulting from greatly enriched collections. The provision of these contexts and the explanation of their benefits has to be a more effective approach than pushing moral obligation, or intimidating them into thinking they are inferior amongst their fellow association members. The reality is that policy documents present challenges to

practices, to attitudes and to modes of governance. To deny these issues, or fail to address them directly undermines the useability of the document.

The provision of sufficient information to enable all members to feel adequately informed on the topics of relevance to a policy can contribute to an outward acknowledgment of, and response to, the needs of diverse elements of the museum community. So policy documents need to be complemented with programs of information and contextualisation, illustrating the reasons for, and the benefits of undertaking the processes of change advocated in the policy, and also by providing tools for facilitation of this change. Several interviewees suggested a 'tool kit' containing fundamental information explaining how do you recognise a potentially sensitive item; why is it important that it not be displayed; who can museum workers contact to help them through this? Expansion upon this may well make Museums Australia Inc.'s policy principles more readily accepted and its documents more readily applied.

Museum groups making first attempts to develop effective partnerships with local Aboriginal groups often experience common difficulties. For example, a frequent response to the 1998 Museums Australia (WA) Inc. survey was that, while museums had extended invitations to Aboriginal people to visit or become involved with their activities, the invitation was rarely taken up and the museum workers were unsure as to alternative approaches. Often they gave up in frustration. Difficulties such as these are not insurmountable however, and there are strategies for dealing with them that have previously resulted in the effective completion of numerous projects. It would be very constructive for common problem areas to be identified and modes of dealing with them successfully to be made available and clearly linked to the policy.

The Queensland Branch of Museums Australia Inc.'s resource guide *Taking the Time: museums and galleries, cultural protocols and communities* (Museums Australia (Qld) 1998),

addresses the benefits and complexities of working with culturally diverse communities. It goes some way towards addressing commonly encountered challenges. *Taking the Time* also highlights the strengths and benefits of accepting the challenge to work with local Aboriginal communities. It is a good example of the type of material that is needed to support and contextualise Museums Australia Inc. policy statements in order to facilitate their use in a supportive and non-intimidating manner.

The unsavoury reality of chronic under resourcing also must not be overlooked in policy development. The extreme challenges presented by resource limitations were highlighted in an interview where a local government employed curator spoke of hand cutting foam core for labels in order to save the museum \$10 or \$15! With this being the reality of resources in these museums, monetary issues become the determining factor in the prioritisation of projects.

It has become a common and not unreasonable expectation that Aboriginal people will be reimbursed for sharing their cultural knowledge, and sitting fees are often requested. However, if this is a condition of participation placed on a museum with no money, the project will fail from the very outset. Some information accompanying the policy document, that flags this as an issue and offers suggestions enabling access to consultation funds, would encourage people not to give up before they get started on projects of consultation and community involvement. Indeed it needs to be spelt out to community museum workers that in addition to responding to a modern moral obligation to consult indigenous people, the enrichment of collections, and valuable community cultural development, equally valuable funding opportunities can arise out of a museum's application of *Previous Possessions New Obligations*. Highlighting opportunities for support is important, as many people made the comment that externally developed policy documents would sustain a greater chance of application if they were linked to funding and other resource opportunities.

Museums Australia Inc., in its policy development role may not be in a position to provide funds to facilitate the use of their policies, but good policies should work as advocacy tools to increase community museums' level of access to appropriate funding sources. More practically, a well developed series of suggested links to grant programs sympathetic to projects reflecting community cultural diversity would provide a tangible incentive for museums to prioritise *Previous Possessions New Obligations* as the basis for a key project.

### **Interpretation**

The Heritage Collections Council, on which representatives of Museums Australia Inc. sit, has developed some very valuable resources focusing on collection management issues relevant to community based care of the distributed national collection. These have included, *reCollections* (1998) as well as the development of significance assessment guidelines and a disaster preparedness planning manual. With their focus on care of collections, collection management and preventative conservation, these documents do not give substantial attention to collection interpretation, community links to collections or the development of particular types of collections. Museums Australia Inc.'s own initiative *Caring for our Culture* (Museums Australia Inc. 1998 (a)) looks at benchmarks for best practice and addresses interpretation issues peripherally.

This leaves Museums Australia Inc.'s policy documents (Museums Australia Inc. 1996, 1998(b), 1999, 2000) as the main museum sector vehicle for reflection on interpretation. Yet these lack crucial elements to help people learn new things and to grasp new theoretical frameworks such as those presented by policies designed to promote change. Museums Australia Inc. documents do not provide such help or guidelines for practice, and consequently do not realise their full potential.

## Policy Support

In order for a policy document to mean anything it must be useable and then effective. To enable this, consideration of its practical application needs to be a core element of its development and should result in some mechanism to support and facilitate its use in museum environments. Dry, formal policy statements are inappropriate for a voluntary membership organisation. They resemble internal policy documents and therefore seem to bear little relevance in the organisational paperwork, where it exists, of smaller museums. Alternatively, in those museums that set their own policy directions, external policy initiative can appear to be essentially redundant. As with the other Museums Australia Inc. cultural policy documents available, the time and energy put into their development has been somewhat undermined by subsequent neglect.

As the work of the State branches of Museums Australia Inc. involves the closest contact with members, they generally take up the practical responsibility of dissemination and support of policy initiatives. As the policies are limited in their effectiveness as tools anyway, the result is a somewhat haphazard and inconsistent level of support determined by the priorities and resources of each of the states. Often, as was the case with *Taking the Time*, or the 1998 Western Australian survey of the use of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in Western Australian museums, important work supporting national policy initiatives is undertaken and funded by a state branch of Museums Australia Inc. However, State branches really have no capacity, resources, or responsibility to expand their activities beyond their state.

*Taking the Time* already contains some of the elements needed to help make *Previous Possessions New Obligations* stronger. Some of the tools have been developed, but they require wide ranging promotion and the support of the national association. In both advocacy value as well as practical and financial terms, the cost of the development of a facilitation kit

or package to support policy and practice initiatives would be offset by increased positive impact. The outcomes would then reasonably be considered as initiatives of substance rather than documents of limited relevance to a substantial and important sector of the membership.

### **The Future of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* and its Fellow Policies**

At a Museums and Reconciliation forum in Canberra on International Museums Day, 18 May 2000, Museums Australia Inc. communicated to members that it has commissioned a review of the effectiveness of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in order to develop a new and better version of the document. However, as a result of the terms of reference, and the level of resourcing provided, the review team were limiting their consultation to large institutions. Such a review process does not bode well for the possibility that Museums Australia Inc. might be able to facilitate a positive and enduring change to modes of representation of indigenous people in community museums. This is unfortunate given the significance continuing to be publicly placed by this association on *Previous Possessions New Obligations*.

The opportunity is currently available for Museums Australia Inc. to strategically launch and position its policy on cultural diversity within the framework of its key issues. If well presented and delivered, the *Cultural Diversity Policy* (Museums Australia Inc. 2000) should be able to contextualise all the other Museums Australia Inc. policies of this type including *Previous Possessions New Obligations*. There is the potential for a long awaited framework to be placed around a hitherto loosely directed argument. So rather than policy appearing somewhat haphazardly, in accordance with the priorities of specific industry interest groups, the cultural diversity activities of the organisation could have greater structure. With the launch of the *Cultural Diversity Policy*, and a recent, albeit limited, review of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* under way, it would indeed be unfortunate if the

opportunity of this critical moment was not used to its greatest advantage. If this opportunity *is* taken to clearly frame and make sense of existing policy documents to the full scope of membership, new and positive uses for *Previous Possession New Obligations* and the other policies will be available to those communities and organisations amongst whom the policy could be an effective practical and advocacy tool for Museums Australia Inc.

It was my intention that the drawing out into practical recommendations of the various problem areas around use of *Previous Possessions New Obligations* in community museums would help avoid their repetition in future policy initiatives undertaken on their behalf. It is certainly important that Museums Australia Inc. continues to bring contemporary frameworks for museological practice to the fore, and policy documents have the potential to be an effective way of doing this. Indeed, as the professional association for the Museum sector in Australia, Museums Australia Inc. really is the most appropriate body to take a stance on progressive practice and advocate strongly for its assumption across the sector. There is no doubt that policies of cultural diversity are crucial tools for the sector in numerous ways.

As the only body working across the entirety of the museum sector in this position, it is all the more imperative that Museums Australia Inc. gets it right when it does take a position on policy, practice and other important issues. It needs to address and incorporate the needs of all its membership by seeking out, understanding and truly reflecting their diversity. It needs to communicate effectively to and for its membership in its policy initiatives and it needs to show an understanding that the strength of these is in its membership's acceptance and application of them. Museums Australia Inc.'s responsiveness to and support of the diversity of the museum community is the vital link to the museums sector's responsiveness to the cultural diversity of the Australian community.

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### **Personal Communications**

Dr Chris Anderson, Director, South Australian Museum, interviewed on 16 March 1998.

Mr Andrew Reeves, Director, Western Australian Museum, interviewed on 8 December 1998.

Dr John Stanton, Director, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, interviewed on 30 April, 1998.

Six anonymous Western Australian museum workers, interviewed at various times throughout 1998.