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**From Dictation Test to Detention Centres  
Exhibiting Controversy, Past and Present**

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**1. Introduction**

I've subtitled this paper 'exhibiting controversy, past and present' but perhaps it would have been more accurate to say 'presenting the past and present will be controversial for some people'! Museums present content in exhibitions which has been contentious, both in its day, and in retrospect, such as the White Australia Policy. Moreover, museums may be seen by the community to be deliberately controversial by producing such exhibitions, especially when they include contested contemporary issues, such as current immigration policy. It is a challenge not often undertaken by museums — perhaps because it lacks the safety of historical distance. When dealing with current issues, we are all, in a sense, implicated, making the museum's voice and position a fine balance to achieve.

I will attempt to explore these issues by drawing upon my current experiences in developing a new exhibition on Australian immigration policy at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne. Firstly, I would like to set the scene for change by quickly reassessing our original interpretive methodology, and why we are now injecting a different interpretive approach. Secondly, I will briefly present the findings of audience evaluation which has informed the development of our interpretive methodology. I will then provide a broad overview of the content for the new exhibition and outline a couple of ideas for interpretive techniques. Finally I will move into a discussion about the various questions this exhibition is throwing up — such as questioning the role of the museum in contemporary social and historical debate, and how to strike the right note for visitors so that we inform without preaching.

And a caveat — this is an exhibition in the early stages, definitely a work in progress, so please bear with any lack of conclusivity on my part. My other plea for tolerance will be my visuals — as there is yet no exhibition, I will be showing slides of the sort of material I had on hand that we may feature in the exhibition, but have nothing concrete to show you and no contemporary images.

**2. Inaugural Interpretive Approach at the Immigration Museum:**

The guiding mission or principle behind the exhibitions and indeed the public programs in general at the Immigration Museum, is that there is an immigration experience in the life or family history of all non-Indigenous Victorians. When we developed the core exhibitions prior to opening in 1998, we developed a number of interpretive methodologies, including the

immersive ‘boat’ experience, and the personal ‘spotlight’ stories. The spotlights we hoped would personalise immigration experience, make it accessible to a broad audience, and offset community expectations of comprehensive cultural representation, which we could never hope to achieve. The stories range across time, gender, cultural background and motivation for immigrating, with the objective that visitors may relate to, or sympathise with, some stories, as well as make connections between individual and broader social patterns. Audience evaluations have shown that as an interpretive methodology, this approach is working extremely well.

Nevertheless, it is three years down the track, with the benefit of hindsight, distance, and a little chewing over collegiate feedback. It has become evident that we must take care that this interpretive methodology does not just become a sequence of stories, self-justifying and remote from analysis. For while fulfilling our aim to be inclusive of individual voices, and distilling the broader immigration narrative down to personal stories, I think we lost the opportunity to be more courageous and tackle some of the vast complexities of an immigration history. Because of course the history of immigration, is indeed the very history of our society. For example, we did not deconstruct broader narratives through looking at such issues as the interactions between communities and how these interactions have evolved the society we have today; or more directly grapple with the gritty political and economic landscapes. I still very much support our ‘spotlight’ philosophy and methodology, but it needs augmenting so that the stories become more clearly a part of the sum of immigration history, rather than the sum of its parts.

Now we find ourselves with the opportunity to develop something new in the current Impacts Gallery. It is hoped that this will be an exhibition which both meets audience needs and our collective desire for the injection of a stronger subject spine, by way of a theme we agree has been missing in any depth in our exhibitions — an exhibition about policy.

### **3. Audience Evaluation:**

We have undertaken initial exit survey and focus group evaluation of the concept we are very keen to pursue — an exhibition about Australian immigration policy — and received very interesting responses. Exit surveys revealed that visitors generally have an interest in the subject of immigration policy, how it has evolved and particularly how the processes operate now. Focus groups indicated that people believe the Immigration Museum can play an important role in the debate of current issues — such as asylum seekers and detention centres. They want a ‘dispassionate’ approach; previous galleries in the Museum having already provided the emotional experience. There is a desire for in-depth ‘factual’ information to provide historical and contemporary contexts to policy, drawing upon statistics, policies and original documents. Finally, people want to be able to change or maintain their own intellectual position on issues based on an even-handed presentation of information — there is an unsurprising suspicion of the veracity of the media, whereas museums seem to be viewed as offering balance and reliable information.

Nevertheless, while we garnered public responses to how we might present an exhibition on immigration policy, I state quite openly that our intention was always to pursue such a topic. And I believe that this is an acceptable, indeed often essential, approach to how museums decide which exhibitions to develop. As Richard Sandell argued in 1998 in *Museum Management and Curatorship* : “...it is possible to identify museums acting as vehicles for broad social change by exploiting their potential to communicate, educate and influence public opinion.”<sup>1</sup> A curator’s knowledge in a particular field can advise where intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Sandell, Richard, ‘Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion’ *Museum Management and Curatorship* Vol 17 No.4, 1998, p.412

gaps exist; experienced venue staff, including educators, can pinpoint what sorts of information people are searching for; and we can observe social trends and debate and decide that museums can offer an experience which will enlighten visitors as to the historical background and contemporary issues of a subject of substance. Put simply, we believed it was a theme important to pursue — but we have been able to utilise public input as to how we might most effectively present the information.

#### **4. The Exhibition - *Getting In*:**

Without getting too deeply into the content, I will quickly give you an overview of the current thematic development of *Getting In*, aiming to open in December 2002. Of course there is nothing incredibly new or groundbreaking in all this — museums have been doing exhibitions on immigration policy for some time. But it is new for us and, I believe, particularly pertinent in the current political climate.

The broad exhibition premis is that the bottom line of Australian immigration policy over the last 200 years has been how to ‘get in’. People’s experiences have varied dramatically, from being welcomed, invited, assisted, accepted, discouraged and refused. Basic questions will be addressed — why have some people been allowed in and others not? what rules and regulations have been created over the years to determine a person’s eligibility? how have these rules changed over time? how have these changing policies both reflected and shaped public opinion?

Three themes will underpin the exhibition — Nation-Building, Assistance, and Restriction, and these will be presented through the key immigration categories of Family Reunion, Work and Refuge. The principal themes are innately confronting and have the potential to be controversial. For example, nation-building may be explored in terms of the philosophies and strategies of Australian immigration policy which have always revolved around questions of national identity — what sort of nation do we want to establish? What kind of people do we want living here and being ‘Australians’? What can people offer us that will be of use? These questions were being asked at the time of Federation and are being asked today.

The key to the presentation will be to making connections and comparisons of policy and process at different historical moments, which lead visitors to the present and an understanding of systems operating now. We can demonstrate that family reunion schemes, such as those coordinated by Caroline Chisholm, and Victoria as a refugee destination dates back some 150 years, thereby illustrating from where contemporary immigration policies and processes have evolved.

#### **5. Social and Intellectual Role of Museums:**

So we have our exhibition themes and sub themes. We know that visitors have an interest in the subject, and that they want a balanced and informative presentation that positions present systems within a historical context. All this steady even-handedness should be very simple to achieve with a subject that includes such indifferent and inexcitable subjects as the White Australia Policy, Assimilation, Asylum. As Jamie Oliver would say ‘Easy Peasy’!

We need to decide what and where the Museum’s voice is in all this. When dealing with a subject of the complexity, potential sensitivity and currency of immigration policy, I believe we must find the middle ground. This sounds dangerously like fence sitting but it seems to me that there is no point trying to ram home messages about the evils of the White Australia Policy or the limitations of the current ‘on-shore’ processing of asylum seekers, or, for that matter, the incredible achievement of the post-war immigration project. Firstly, such an approach is always in danger of simplification of complex historical contexts; secondly, to put it bluntly, it will turn visitors off! Thirdly, curatorial ‘soapboxing’ can lead to the alienation of particular community groups, political parties (which pragmatically, may not be wise) and the permanent association of the museum and all its activities with one issue and one viewpoint.

So where does that leave the intellectual and social role of museums? I believe it leaves us with museums providing the forum for community discussion and debate by, to put it simply, providing, dare I say it, the facts and their multiple contexts. So for example, we can present (in an engaging way we haven't worked out yet) the who, came when, from where, statistics over time; we can parallel the implementation of certain policies at different times with the flow and composition of immigration; we can demonstrate, without fear or favour, the historical and contemporary pragmatics of application and assessment processes. We can demonstrate on-shore and off-shore asylum applications. Consequently, the evolution of who has been getting in, why and how, will become self evident. We can quote Alfred Deakin when he said in reference to the Dictation Test: "the object of applying the language test is not to allow persons to enter the Commonwealth but to keep them out". We can present the wording of the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act which enshrined a non-discriminatory immigration philosophy or the terms of the UN International Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of which Australia is a signatory. The bottom line is to allow visitors to make their own interpretations and analysis, but we are not trying to create a controversial exhibition — rather there may be some elements of the past and present that visitors may find confronting, even though our methodology will be non-confrontational.

## **6. Possible Interpretive Approaches:**

The perspective of the content will be important to establish. For *Getting In*, it will be that of the policy-making and process administration. This is not to say that the exhibition gives an 'official' view, but that content will not be delivered through detailed personal stories and perspectives, except as examples of particular policies. Consequently, the exhibition will stand back, present policies and processes through text, statistics, graphics, objects, and audio visual and interactive activities, allowing visitors to access information in different ways, and allow past and present immigration philosophies and systems to speak for themselves. It should provide a content 'launching pad' for visitors, so that they can leave the Museum challenged, thoughtful and in the contemporary world — thinking about current issues. In terms of material culture, this will be a challenging exhibition. The subject matter does not lend itself automatically to rich three dimensional collections so it will be a challenge to bring the display off the wall — not to mention the conservation nightmares involved in using original paper-based material!

It is hoped that this approach will strike the right note for visitors. We want to rouse and challenge without threatening or alienating. Nevertheless, we don't want this to be a 'peopleless' exhibition either. How do we focus on facts and figures while injecting a human dimension? I will share with you just two embryonic ideas for interpretive techniques which we hope that, with the right mix, will achieve this fine balance.

Perhaps most importantly will be the development of an interactive which demonstrates the past and present immigration selection processes in an engaging way. People will make choices about who they are, and what period they are in to weave their way through the application process, discovering how processes have and do operate, who is deemed acceptable at any given time, how long it takes and why you have been accepted or rejected. We want to create a sense for people of what it is like to have your future hanging in the balance — either in a contemporary context, or at selected points in time. This kind of idea has been developed at other museums but we hope to experiment with new ways of engaging and informing. This interactive captures the core of the entire exhibition and also provides a new visitor experience in the Immigration Museum.

An effective way to evoke a sense of the mass of people who have immigrated to Australia, as well as the symbolic importance of identification as a tool for entry, may be to create a wallpaper of real-size immigration documents — such as passports, identification certificates, birth and marriage certificates. Up close, visitors will be able to discern the names, dates and

faces of the humanity behind the policy and process. We may then introduce a small number of real people whose stories could be used to pick up a particular theme such as Refugees or Assisted Settlement Schemes. These people could be discovered in pull-out drawers inserted into the texture wall, as if pulled out from the mass of people represented through the documents.

### **7. Wrestling with Myths:**

Inevitably in all this, we will need to, and will be expected to, unravel some of the many myths surrounding historical and contemporary immigration policy — to try to distinguish the fact from the fiction. For example, a White Australia Policy never really existed. Arthur Calwell was a racist. The Immigration Restriction Act stopped all immigration from Asia. There is an orderly queue out there for asylum seekers (couldn't resist). These are beliefs which have and do float around the community — part truths, non truths, none are complete truths. So we might case study a country like Afghanistan and outline the official channels for applying for refugee status. Or we might document the assistance programs for British subjects over time in comparison to those offered to the subjects of other countries. Consequently, the Museum may be able to play an important role by, implicitly through the exhibition, challenging, problematising or debunking often broadly held public views that misinform and mislead both representations of our past and assumptions about our present.

It is difficult because I feel I have almost been promoting a sort of 'absent curatorial voice' approach, the return of empirical truths! What I am trying to suggest is that with emotive and contentious issues, particularly those in which people already seem to be feeling manipulated, museums may perhaps be able to play the role people used to look to the press to play — just give them the facts. But do not think I am being naïve or lacking any sort of agenda. I want people to leave the exhibition wondering if our current humanitarian program could be more generous, especially when compared with former times. I want people to have a dawning realisation of how trying and complex the immigration process can be and to ask themselves 'would I get in, if I tried now, fifty or 100 years ago?' I want people to look at a simple document, like a post WW2 identification certificate and understand how much rides on proof of identity. Undoubtedly, I have motives — but we must allow people to pick up the messages they can or are willing to.

### **8. Conclusion**

Local essayist and critic Dmetri Kakmi, last year described museums in *The Age* as "not a living, thriving, self-perpetuating culture but a troglodyte exhibit frozen in time."<sup>2</sup> But there is no reason, nor excuse, for 'frozen' and anachronistic museums. They live, breathe and change every time we develop an exhibition asking 'what can we contribute to public understandings of a particular issue?' 'who is this exhibition for?' and even 'why isn't this working, let's try something new?'

Museums should respond to, but not be slaves to, public opinion, and retain our critical role in interpreting the past and providing a forum for information about the present. Museums can be social commentators, outing skeletons and debunking myths, and making us more relevant, more responsive and more truly rooted within our communities. Societies are ever changing and ever shifting — demographics evolve, social priorities change, the way we perceive and interpret ourselves alters. Museums should be able to both present and re-evaluate the so-called 'constants' of our histories and environment while also responding to contemporary social shifts and issues. *Getting In*, in one sense, is an example of museum responsiveness and social and cultural relevancy.

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<sup>2</sup> Kakmi, Dmetri, *The Age*, 10 February, 2001

Neil Harris suggested in 1995 in *Museum News* that “...museums should define more clearly and self-consciously their actual goals and relation to truth-seeking, and learn more about how exhibitions function as sources of opinion.”<sup>3</sup> I am conscious that throughout this paper I have been putting forward almost contradictory positions. I want museums to be anti-empirical, yet I am promoting an exhibition about ‘facts’; I believe museums can be social commentators, yet I am describing an exhibition in which the curator is trying to be absent; I am outlining a dispassionate approach to the interpretation, yet I am suggesting that we will provide visitors with the opportunity to ‘become an immigration applicant’ and see what it was and is like. In the end, we can only try it and see how it flies, believing we can inform, and even influence, public opinion at the micro level.

The exhibition is challenging us to grapple with national myths and skeletons, contemporary rhetoric and even polarised public opinion. It’s hard — but for many of us whose museums are about the very core of who we are, and how we came to be so, it’s time.

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, Neil, ‘Exhibiting’, *Museum News*, September, 1995, p. 57