

# The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

**TITLE: Indigenous significance not significant enough**

**AUTHOR: Andrew Macintosh & Deb Wilkinson**

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The Prime Minister's speech to the National Press Club on the eve of Australia Day early this year attracted much comment. Most of this concentrated on his call for "root and branch renewal" of the way Australian history is taught in our schools and the fact that the remarks were another in a long line of not so subtle attacks on the so-called "cultural elites" and "politically correct" ideologues that apparently dominate our educational institutions. Tucked away in the PM's speech however, was a fascinating reference to Indigenous history.

According to the Prime Minister, Indigenous history should be taught as part of the "whole national inheritance". He also indicated that his Government is willing to "meet the Indigenous people more than half way" on the road to reconciliation.

On the basis of these statements, one would expect the Howard Government to have sought to promote the conservation and understanding of Indigenous heritage. It is part of our "national inheritance" and, as such, is surely deserving of equal billing with our colonial and post-Federation history.

Apparently not. A brief look at what the Howard Government has included on the National Heritage List indicates what the Prime Minister actually meant when he advocated a more rigorous teaching of the Australian narrative.

The National Heritage List was established in January 2004 and currently includes 24 places that are supposed to have "outstanding heritage value to the nation". Only five of these have anything to do with Indigenous heritage. The overwhelming majority of the remainder concern places of colonial and post-Federation significance.

Two of the Indigenous sites, Kurnell Peninsula in Sydney and Recherche Bay in Tasmania, relate to colonial history and are of importance from an Indigenous perspective as places of early contact between Europeans and Aboriginals. Recherche Bay is also of Indigenous significance because it yielded some of the best documentary evidence of how Tasmanian Aboriginals lived before the European invasion.

The other three Indigenous heritage sites are the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape - Tyrendarra Area (VIC), Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape - Mt Eccles Lake Condah Area (VIC) and the Brewarrina Aboriginal Fish Traps (Baiaames Ngunnhu)

(NSW). While there is no doubt these places are of considerable value to the relevant Indigenous communities, the grounds on which they were listed indicate that the Howard Government's interest was focused primarily on the fact that these sites contain ingenious structures that were built in pre-European times. That is, it appears these sites were listed because of their historical and archaeological interest rather than their value to the Indigenous communities and their capacity to tell the history and beliefs of these communities.

The message that has emerged from the Howard Government and the Australian Heritage Council seems to be that a place of significance to a particular Indigenous community will not be included on the National Heritage List unless it can be established that the place has something that makes it of special value to a broader Australian audience.

For example, a site that is important in the Dreamtime stories of an Indigenous community will not be listed on these grounds alone. It will have to be proven that the site has some other significance, like remains that are of archaeological interest, plants and animals of importance in natural history or because the site marks a noteworthy event in non-Indigenous Australian history.

This is of crucial importance, as it means that a vast number of places of Indigenous heritage significance will not be eligible for listing. These sites should be celebrated as illustrations of ancient cultures that evolved in the 60,000 years prior to European settlement, but they will be excluded from the National Heritage List because of the Government's lopsided perspective on Australian history.

Even where Indigenous heritage sites clearly meet the Government's warped standards for listing, it has been reluctant to give them official recognition.

The Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia is one example. The Peninsula contains an extensive collection of Aboriginal rock engravings that are of national and international importance. Rumour has it that the Australian Heritage Council has recommended the site be included on the National Heritage List, but apparently the report is being suppressed while the Government allows large energy developments to proceed that could further threaten the integrity of the site.

The Howard Government has also made it clear that it is reluctant to list anything that reflects upon the fight for the civil and political rights of Indigenous Australians.

Back in July 2004, the current Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator Ian Campbell, said that the Wave Hill Walk Off Sites (where protests in the 1960s helped sparked the Aboriginal land rights movement) would be given priority consideration for the National Heritage List. Since then, nothing has been heard from the Minister's office about Wave Hill.

Minister Campbell also recently refused to list the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the National Heritage List's companion register, the Commonwealth Heritage List, which is supposed to include places of heritage significance that are located on Commonwealth land.

Like the Wave Hill Walk Off Sites, the Tent Embassy marks an historically significant moment in the history of the Indigenous land rights movement and the development of Australian democracy. Despite receiving advice from the Australian Heritage Council that the Embassy met the listing criteria, the Minister rejected the nomination claiming the listing would be divisive.

The Prime Minister may have made all the appropriate noises about Indigenous heritage in his swipe at the way history is taught in Australian schools, but the administration of the Federal heritage portfolio tells another story. Behold the culture wars, revisionism Howard Government style, where the history of Indigenous Australians and their role in shaping our society and environment is expunged from the record. So much for the Prime Minister's "progressive spirit of the Enlightenment".