

Science: Built in scepticism, intelligent design and the Universal Museum

by Des Griffin

Gerard Krefft Memorial Fellow
Australian Museum

Des Griffin is currently a Gerard Krefft Memorial Fellow, Australian Museum, an honorary position. He served from 1976 through 1998 as Director of the Museum. Prior to that he was a Senior Research Scientist at the Museum conducting research on marine science, particularly the biology of Crustacea.

He was the Chairman of the Council of Australian Museum Associations Inc (CAMA) from 1988 through 1993 and the first President, until 1996, of Museums Australia, the single association representing museums of art, history and science. Des was instrumental in the development, for CAMA and Museums Australia, of a policy on museums in Australia and indigenous peoples.

He is currently a director (since 2006) of Viscopy, a company which seeks to protect and advance the interests of visual artists by licensing the works of artists, representing their copyright and other rights.

Des was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) on 26 January 1990 in recognition of services to museums.



The intercom buzzed.

His secretary,
*"It's the Chairman
on the line"*

The last meeting of the Board had been difficult, as most had become since Les Bruntland, now the Chairman, had joined the Board.

Bruntland had told the meeting that the Minister wanted the Museum to hold a public discussion on evolutionary theory and intelligent design. Gerald Johns, director of the museum, couldn't agree with this: his scientists would skewer him. And he knew he didn't have to go there anyway, he had already had many discussions about the whole issue. Intelligent design was faith, not science. As was so often the case, other members of the board said very little but several agreed that scientists at the Museum seemed to be very elitist about what it was that constituted the truth.

Over the first two years of his appointment, Gerald had come to be regarded by the Board and some others, including reporters in the media and others who had access to the

Minister, as stubborn and opinionated. Worse, one influential citizen had said he was not going to continue with his substantial donation of funds to the Museum if Gerald didn't agree to this discussion. That person was a friend of Jack McKenzie, another Board member who had a keen interest in the collecting of African and Asian artefacts and was contemplating donating them to the Museum in due course.

It didn't seem to matter that Gerald had raised a million dollars from a couple of companies and some individuals with an interest in promoting science for a major temporary exhibition on the evolution of invertebrate animals, insects and their relatives. Until recently this subject had been discussed as if it was in the realm of metaphysics rather than science. One of his best people had been conducting ground breaking research in the area.

Gerald, "Hello, how are you?"

Les Bruntland, "Good. I want to take up the matter raised at the last board meeting about the debate. You really did seem to over react to the comments from some of the board members."

Gerald winced. "The scientists at the Museum don't object to intelligent design because they want to assert their authority. The fact is that intelligent design isn't science, it's just a cover for creationism and we've been there. So why would we at the Museum be considering it?"

The Chairman hit back, "The fact is that the Museum conducts science and many in the community are unsure about how views are arrived at and why scientists argue and what that means in terms of facts. They believe science deals with facts but they are confused by the use of the word theory when it comes to evolution."

Gerald, "Well, on the Science Show the other day, that noted author Ian McEwan was making the point that science contains built in scepticism; that's why scientists often seem so difficult when it comes to matters like this."

Les interrupted, "Gerald, for many people that is a problem. About 40 per cent of students at one of the universities consider that creationism offers the better explanation of how life came to be like it is. The Minister wants this discussion to take place."

Gerald persisted. "How is this going to go down with Professor Abercrombie from the University of South Chatswood who has major influence with the scientific community in this city?"

"The Minister will talk with him."

Gerald, "And then on another matter .." Gerald felt he couldn't go any further with the Chairman.

"I will get back to you; I'll talk it over with some of my people here."

"Well, it will need to be before the end of the week."

Bruntland hung up the phone loudly.

It was 11:30 in the morning. Fred Williams, another board member and a Professor of Archaeology at the New University of Vacluse, was going to attend a conference overseas on the return of cultural property. It was to celebrate a new museum which was seeking the return of treasures from the Netherlands.

Sam Golding, one of his senior staff in Anthropology, wanted to see him about this issue. Sam had been involved with development of the policy on return of cultural property and was very frustrated that Williams and not he was going to this conference and he wasn't.

The Museum had held a conference on this subject the previous year which ended up costing the Museum a lot of money because a promised donor failed to honour his undertaking at the last minute. Problems with his investments he had said.

Gerald sympathised with Sam but... Could he say to Mr Williams that he didn't think he should go and that his Curator should go instead?

And another thing. Was this conference going to make any difference or was it just an opportunity for a set of people to get together to talk to each other and feel good because they all thought the same way? After all, the return of the material in question had been a major issue for a couple of decades. Surely the whole thing needed to be brought to the fore politically: another conference was not going to achieve the return of the stuff.

Sam was a tall gangly man of 45 years who had joined the Museum from a major museum in the US 10 years earlier. He had conducted field work in Vanuatu over the last 20 years becoming a recognised world expert on the meaning of ni-Vanuatu cultural practice and in particular the relationships between the various peoples of the complex chain of islands.

Sam had attended important discussions convened by UNESCO which had drawn up procedures for the consideration of claims for restitution, return and repatriation and was well known to legal experts in the field with whom he had worked on some important projects.

Gerald wondered why he had not been invited to this conference anyway. One of the people who had been on the board for some years had certainly said to Fred Williams that it really was appropriate for the Museum to send a member of staff to the conference.

Sam entered. Gerald invited him to a chair next to the low coffee table where he usually had discussions with staff.

"So what's the latest on this whole thing?"

"Well, I still believe it would be appropriate for me to attend this conference. Perhaps I could go as well as Mr Williams."

Gerald thought for a moment. It would be one way of overcoming the problem perhaps though he wasn't sure if Williams would be entirely happy. On the other hand his responsibility was to ensure as far as possible that the Museum made the best possible representation on these issues. And it was an international forum, where Sam was well known. Then there was the business of overseas travel. Would the Minister approve the travel if he knew that a board member was also going? Yet the Museum had been a leader in this area and the government had gained international kudos as a result.

Gerald swivelled back around to face Golding. "Alright, look that's what I will try. I will have to gain the Minister's agreement anyway."

"Then there is the question of course of what this conference is going to achieve."

"Yes I know that is an issue. But it is a major forum and it would be unfortunate if we were not there. The British Museum will be represented and so will the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and I think we are getting close to moving away from using that silly declaration of the universal museum to block every request for return of material to countries of origin." Sam stared ahead.

"Alright. I'll talk to Fred Williams. And to Les Bruntland. I'm having an argument with him about the proposal for a public discussion on intelligent design so I may find it difficult."

"Good luck!" Sam left the office.

The phone buzzed again. "It's the Minister on the phone." Gerald grimaced. He knew what this would be about: the bloody public forum.

Gerald picked up the phone.

"Yes, Minister, how are you?"

"Look, I'm getting rather annoyed over this refusal to hold the public forum on intelligent design. I've been speaking with the Chairman and he tells me he is not making much headway."

Gerald raised his voice. "Well, he isn't because the idea is unsustainable. We aren't talking about science here, we are talking about religion, about faith. If you thought about it you might recall that Thomas Aquinas made that important distinction centuries ago."

"That was centuries ago and it is no use telling the public who talk to me, and that includes some influential business people who might be important to the Museum about Thomas Aquinas.."

"Well, that is my view!" Gerald was emphatic. He could hear the Minister fuming.

"Well, I'm going to have it put on the agenda for the next meeting of the Museum's board again."

Gerald thought of that aphorism about he who controlled the agenda controlled the meeting. The Minister hung up.

Gerald turned around and looked out the window. He wondered again about life going on outside the Museum and whether his friend Alistair over at the City Museum of Art had to put up with difficult board members like this. He remembered that he used to but that then a very influential member of one of the 'think tanks' in the city had been appointed to the board who had firm views about what was policy and what was the proper concern of the director. That had quietened things down a bit.

Gerald remembered that Professor McMurtrie who had been chair of the board before and was widely appreciated by many board members was in good terms still with the present chair and also was respected by the Minister.

He reached for the phone.



Was this conference going to make any difference or was it just an opportunity for a set of people to get together to talk to each other and feel good because they all thought the same way?

SCENARIO 3

The next afternoon Mr Bruntland called again.

“Well, I’ve changed my mind on the public forum.”

“Oh, I see. And what is the situation now?”

“Well, McMurtrie called me. He made it clear that having this forum actually wouldn’t advance our standing in the city and he said he had made that clear to the Minister also who had said he would talk to his people about it. He emphasised the important research the museum was doing on evolution.”

“And what about our staff member Sam Golding going to that conference I mentioned to you?”

“Well, the Minister will consider the issue if you write the usual submission. He happens to feel quite strongly about the return of cultural property, especially since the election of the new Prime Minister.”

“Well thanks very much. I’m very pleased.”

“Yes, good. OK. Now I would like to talk about including the proposal for that donation of the African collection on the agenda for the next meeting.”

Gerald reached for the notes he had on the next meeting’s agenda.

Exercise

How should the relative responsibilities of the board and executive be defined and what kinds of things determine an effective working relationship between board and executive?

What actions need to be taken to define what issues a museum can sensibly involve itself in publicly?

To what extent are the views of government representatives such as Ministers sufficient to drive the agenda of the Museum?

Is the provision of substantial financial support by government sufficient to warrant its intervention?



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