Conservation Priorities in Museums

J. Ling

When the Conference of Australian Museum Directors came to prepare its submission to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections it naturally drew on the views of individual museum directors or boards of governors. There was a remarkable degree of unanimity as to the problems facing Australian museums and priorities in meeting these problems. Above all other considerations the critical condition of the nation's collections, the bulk of which are presently held in the major state museums, dominates the museum crisis today – as it has done for upwards of half a century. It does seem incredible that, historic, aesthetic, scientific and cultural considerations aside, not even the sheer cash value of these collections – possibly in excess of a billion dollars, has induced governments to part with anything like sufficient funds to cope with the problem of their conservation. When these three aspects *are* taken into account the neglect borders on cupidity, wickedness and waste.

I use these words of the late Jock Marshall from his book "The Great Extermination" which set nature conservation alight in Australia, because they *are* strong stuff and this country's Museum collections are generally in such a parlous state that only strong and immediate measures can remedy the situation. Not to do so would be wicked and wasteful.

Is it not somewhat ironic that the best conservation laboratory in Australia was established for the treatment of (admittedly priceless) material which originated in a foreign country on the opposite side of the earth? Yet Australian ethnographic collections, regarded as the most notable in the world, moulder away in deficient storage all over the country for want simply of suitable storage space for most and stabilization and/or restoration for some of the material?

For the $9000 spent on restoring a railway engine a technical conservator could work for a year in a museum; for $30,000 spent to move an old lighthouse from A to B a modest conservation facility could be set up; for the $380,000 spent on turning a former premier's home into a restaurant a first-class conservation laboratory could be established, equipped and staffed. There are similar examples all over Australia of such priorities as to leave museum curators aghast, worthy as all these projects may be.

If Australia as a whole is regarded as the museum for its national heritage then the conservation priorities in this museum are, in the light of recent initiatives exemplified above, sadly astray if not naive, inane or not a little political, as the timing and location of certain enterprises do little to deny. The conservation of much of the material held by the major Australian museums would be unspectacular, tedious and demanding. But the priorities lie with material and cultures originating in, or even before the earliest times of this continent's history. There are natural history collections in the South Australian Museum taken scarcely a decade after the foundation of the state. Ethnographic material predates the white man's invasion of this country, yet survives cultures long since gone. However, a re-awakening of interest by the public, including the Aboriginal people themselves in their former material culture requires that much of what exists now only in museums be brought out of storage, consolidated or restored and used to create an even greater awareness and understanding of their traditional way of life and implements. The value of the really old material in these collections is such that its condition must be safeguarded for an increasing variety of inquiries today and in the future. It is thus necessary for much material to be in such a condition as even to

be handled safely, not just looked at behind glass, but studied, measured, examined and revered.

Conservation to museologists is the combating of decay in cultural property so that it can continue to be preserved. Conservation is what museums are all about.

Conservation thus is the end to which 'museums' are merely a means. This is worth some elaboration before a professional audience like ours, sustained as it is by a public whose idea of a museum still seems framed in the image of a building, principally composed of exhibition galleries.

To our profession at this time the word 'museum' means much more than this. Natural History museums, Art Galleries and Archives are all differing species of the genus *museum.* So are conservation parks, zoological and botanical gardens, scheduled sites, buildings, monuments and townscapes. The protecting of certain species of wildlife and categories of cultural property is a proper task of Museums. Listening to the debates of today, it might not be unreasonable to argue that the raw materials of technology themselves are an ever diminishing resource that might even in time fall to fearless curators to protect! In the world of today then, Malraux's brilliant perception of the 'Museum without Walls' has become a living reality.

Within such a broad definition, the concept of conservation must assume many guises. It can mean the prevention of the *possibility* of decay by stabilising the conditions of maintenance. This can apply to collections, it can also apply to selected segments of the natural environment. Second, it can mean *stabilising* decay itself and arresting its progress. This too can be applied across the whole of the spectrum. Finally and most recently, it can mean the physical *reversion* of decay processes. This can take the form of chemical and technological inducements on the one hand or by the application of restorative materials in obedience to a disciplined imagination on the other. This can apply to collections, where its effectiveness has been repeatedly and dramatically proven. I do not need to elaborate on the modern miracles wrought by reversing the mechanism of metallic corrosion. The other and more traditional mode of reconstructing objects by resorting to a disciplined imagination is best known to us from the art world. This same conservation, defined as reversing and repairing the products of decay, can however be applied to the cultural landscape as well and is beginning now to be applied with satisfactory results.

The matter of priorities however is a much more thorny problem since it is inseparable from human values and their assessment. These values in turn govern the time, trouble and expenses applied to conservation by public agencies, which now absorb most of the work of conservation, and which are therefore obliged to justify it in terms of public welfare. These values therefore govern the share these agencies obtain from the public purse.

Conservation and public welfare have become increasingly less remote from the other in recent years. This time and place supply a suitable moment and venue for renewing attention to this issue. In the past few years, we have observed and responded, first to a national inquiry into the irreplaceable cultural resource of the national estate and, latterly, a further national inquiry into the existing infrastructure of Museums themselves. Despite what may have been said at various times, these moves were not daring strokes of notable members of parties elected into office, they have emerged slowly but surely in recent decades in response to deep-seated convictions by an ever-broadening spectrum of an increasingly better educated and aware citizenry, who are usually well ahead of the politicians.

Priorities we know are what you have to put up with after you know for sure that your hopes were in vain. Priorities, moreover, have a slightly different countenance everywhere you go.

As Chairman of the Conference of Australian Museum Directors, I see conservation priorities at this moment as:—

1. Improving the physical side of the Museum business. We need bigger and better museums so that we can fulfil our functions properly. By this I mean critical reviews of collections, carefully researched acquisition priorities and better researched schemes for remobilising collections in the interest of publics who want to see them more often and have better access to them. This has its counter-requirement on us to liaise more closely with our collegual cousins in art galleries, archives and wildlife and environmental protection agencies.
2. Creating a national fund for museum-based researches. This would be a true master stroke and a real precedent. What we need is a Museums Commission and one that distributes taxpayers' money, like the Universities Commission, the Schools Commission, the National Health and Medical Research Council, and the Australian Research Grants Committee. In other words we need a properly endowed body solely to sustain museological research and development that will conform to contemporary standards and requirements. What we want, and it is to be hoped that this is put politely, is something more than was suggested by the recent Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections.

Given some accommodation to these priorities, many of our current concerns assume their proper place as matters of policy and detail.

In a nutshell, museum conservation needs can be met by improving and increasing:—

1. Trained Conservation staff (even in the appalling accommodation which many museums could now only offer).
2. Space (for work and better storage).
3. Research (to solve many basic conservation problems).
4. Training (in preventative and restorative curation).
5. Communication (short-circuiting each other's problems).
6. Public sympathy.

This means money.

Recent experience with the Australian Biological Resources Study has shown that Museums, accustomed as they are to operating under the most impecunious circumstances, have been able to exact great benefits from the injection of even relatively modest funds. While this is not to say that sweeping improvements to the ability of Australian museums to carry out their legally prescribed functions, including conservation, would not involve vast sums of money, real professionals can make a little go a very long way. If, for example, the Federal Government, in the interests of the National collections held by the major State museums, were to provide one conservator and a modest operating budget to each State institution, the cost would be little more than a mere $100,000 per year. Surely this is a miniscule insurance premium to pay for a cover of about a billion dollars.

I do not agree with too much emphasis being placed upon a centralised conservation facility — in Canberra or anywhere else for that matter, given the delay that would mean. A rationalized policy should ensure that the problems are tackled now, immediately and where they lie. Only the museums know their needs and priorities. Only when they have made a start on the long job can a really national effort be sensibly mounted. Even then we have the problem of Australian distances to overcome. The Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material could not do better right now than to find out from each major museum what is its topmost conservation priority and then to hammer the Federal and State governments until at least one person is appointed to each State museum with a realistic operating budget to begin. No other central agency or action is needed for that first faltering step in the restoration of our collections.

The second need is space, adequate in quantity and of a suitable environmental quality. In planning new space requirements expansion factors are almost mind-boggling and there will be desperate attempts by funding bodies to laugh at proper immediate requirements — let alone allow for future acquisitions. Sadly, however, it is even more imperative to instill in the minds of those controlling the funding of museum development some idea of the *quality* of museum space needs.

The following quotation from an official government report (about prisons) aptly summarizes the view of many government officials when thinking of museum accommodation:

"Some buildings of recent construction are almost lavish in their facilities while others are so old and dilapidated that if they are to be preserved at all their conversion into museums appears to be the only reasonable course of action."*

It is most unlikely that much existing alternative accommodation is really suitable for museum storage (quite apart from its probable separation from the institution by upwards of several miles). In other words additional museum storage will have to be built. The Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material should therefore address itself to the preparation of a succinct manual of basic and detailed ideas of proper accommodation for museum collections with the adoption of standard practices and physical facilities as far as is practicable to reduce costs. Thus we would have minimum standards of accommodation below which museums should not be forced to accept.

Research into these facilities is going on all the time in museums throughout Australia. Once again there is considerable expertise and information already available which only needs to be collated, coordinated and sifted for solutions to be found to numerous problems which are basic to museums. Again there is no need to wait for a new central organization to be legislated for, set up and staffed. Surely the Institute has sufficient collective expertise to oversee a small secretariat whose job it would be to garner information from the State museums on their current practices, pitfalls and successes to be made available to all. The initiation of such a research project, which in essence is one of information retrieval, ought, with expertise already available, to be possible on a very modest budget and with very little delay.

It will take time to uncover many of the actual conservation problems and longer still to find solutions which have to be devised, possibly through the application of much basic research still to be done. But here again the lead should come from the institutions uncovering the problems, to be tackled by researchers who need not wait for a particular conservation research institute to be

*Criminal Law and Penal Methods Reform Committee, First Report, 1973, p. 191.

established. A lot of expertise must already be available and ready to be turned to the study of some of our more pressing problems of consolidation, restoration and conservation of museums' more valuable possessions. Surely many basic conservation problems could be studied as research projects by post-graduate students who would then form the nucleus of a larger conservation research facility in a few years time. Thus for the expenditure of relatively small sums of money joint museum/research student teams could at least make a start on some of the more basic questions. Why must we wait for elaborate machinery and empires to be established when we know very well what our problems are and need only the properly trained people to study them and come up with some answers? The Australian Research Grants Committee has been funding projects in four special fields during the last few years. Why not allot a separate amount to be disbursed by A.R.G.C. on research projects in the field of museum conservation? The sooner more money is provided for mission-orientated research such as this, and many other fields more closely allied to real goals, the better.

Trained conservators will flow naturally from a flourishing research field, but of course specialist training of museum personnel and people destined for the museum profession must be provided. It would be unrealistic to try to justify more than one such programme, at least in the early stages. However two-way communication between this school and other practitioners of the art and science of museum conservation would be essential and a vital part of the movement. Here then might be the beginning of an institute in physical terms, building on the important role that the present Institute could play in coordination and communication of methods and ideas.

Thus regular seminars and the importation of experts from other areas would be used to disseminate the information being generated by thriving conservation facilities in each of the museums, active research being carried out in adjacent laboratories and the research and training programme under the auspices of the Institute.

This Conference is an admirable point from which to start. It is making a significant contribution to the communication of ideas on the conservation of cultural material in Australian museums — one of their most worrying, if not their gravest concern.

Finally it would be well for us to pay greater attention to our displays if we are to keep faith with the public on whose behalf we care for the collections. As they become more accessible and in a safe condition for display, we must bring more material out of storage and into the galleries. While we all recognize that a large part of the collections is not suitable for display, it is idle to deny that much material hidden away in our stores should be exhibited. Short-term exhibitions, ringing in the changes must follow successful combating of conservation and storage problems. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of the Fremantle Museum is the nature and extent of the restoration of much of the material on display. But is not the public *entitled* to see something for their money? The conservation of cultural material in museums would be a shallow and short-lived exercise indeed if it does not lead to better public exhibitions.