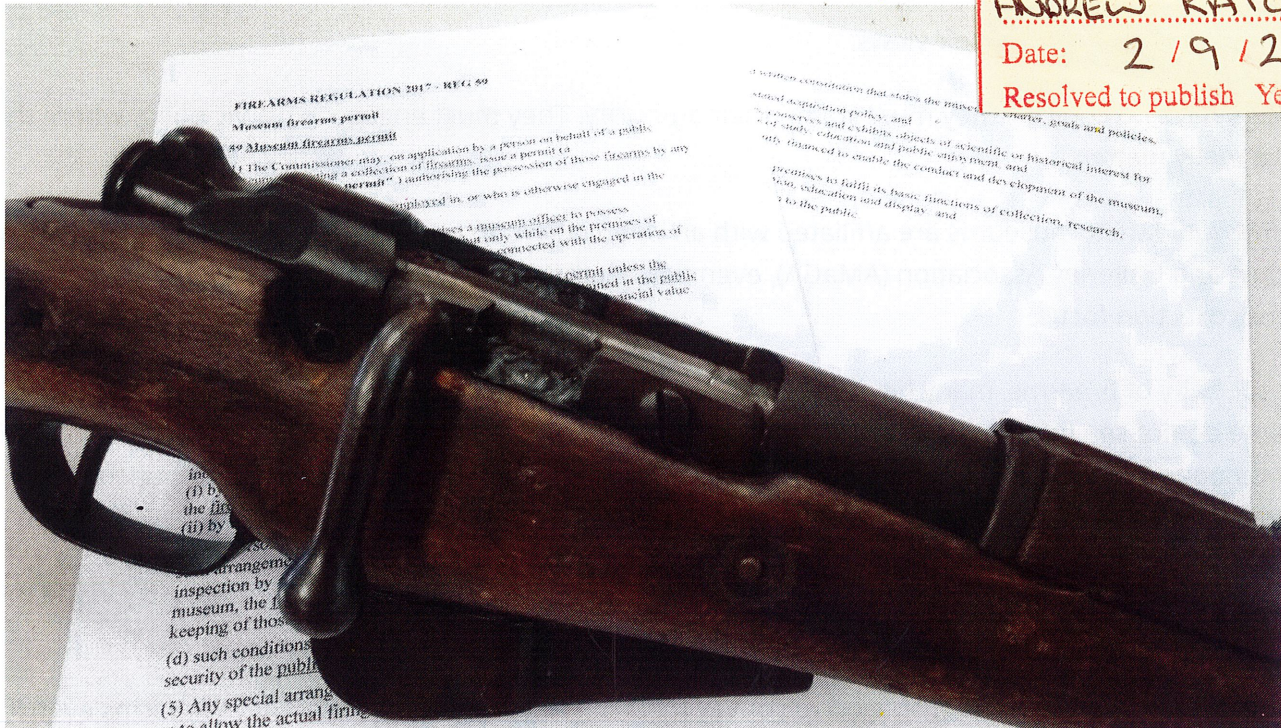


Role Of Museums In Public Policy



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R Benedet, President Lithgow SAF Museum

Museums are places of cultural significance. They are icons in society whose objects are priceless. Museums across Australia work each day to provide important educational experiences to diverse audiences that make a difference in people's lives. Museums enrich communities and preserve unique culture and history for all Australians.

We know from various empirical evidence of the overwhelming positivity exhibited by the general public towards museums. Further, museums are viewed as educational assets belonging the wider community.

But how good are museums in influencing public policy issues as they affect day to day operations of museums. How do museums champion a cause in the name of community interest or how are they organised to show strong leadership and be proactive in advancing the work of Museums for the benefit of the diverse audience they serve.

A current case for us is the issue surrounding the current Firearms Regulation which we have fought against over the past 6 months. We made clear our position at ministerial and departmental circles and have

assembled a significant support base which has helped our cause significantly.

Leading the charge on behalf of museums across the State is something we have taken on in the absence of any other avenue. Our case symbolises a vitally important but reactive stance – responding to an issue after the event.

But what of museums being in a leadership role, being proactive and influencing key policy decisions through insightful knowhow and carefully thought through initiatives.

A number of questions surface immediately – how do museums do this; do they have the critical mass to influence; do they have the technical nous to educate the uneducated; do they have the time and inclination; and, are they respected for their views.

Museums have no choice – they must stamp their authority. They must engage in public policy where their services really matter.

Like other industries, museums are affiliated with an 'association'. In our case, it is the broad-based Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), even though there is no specific collegiate organisation with a firearms collection focus.

In our specialty of firearms, many have little understanding of how museums operate and what they possess and some do not see past the end of a barrel. To them, museum firearms are about gun control – that's it. A rather tenuous and irresponsible connection which brands museums as some 'gun happy' bunch. The misunderstanding is frightening.

This is why we and the Gunnedah Museum 'stepped up to the plate' and defended our industry in the midst of those who have other agendas.

It is work in progress but we've managed to convey meaning to the work of museums in firearms even if that is not through the established 'association' channels. Convincing regulators with a mindset for more regulation as their answer to everyday issues has been our focus.

But in reality, that is only part of the job we must do.

The other and perhaps more important part is in in shaping public policy. In our case, areas such STEM, industrial heritage, precision-based production technologies, tourism, funding programs and digital systems are some of the things we need to express a position on.

The history of firearms involves innovative skills and techniques which in today's society may be 'lost' but the learnings are very much still relevant. And they are learnings from mass production processes which influence science, mathematics, engineering, metrology, materials, machining & cutting technology, production systems and forensic ballistics.

Furthermore, our museum has a role to play in digitalisation competencies and security and public safety systems.

As a privately-run museum, we find that time is against us – there are so many other things to attend to and our resources are spread thinly as it is. Nonetheless, there are things we need to have 'our say' on and our aim is to venture into this space more and more.

With the affiliation we have made with Gunnedah Museum and others on the Firearms Regulation issue, there is a definite need for us all to work as a group and from this we are hopeful we can elevate our public stance in a proactive way.