

A Letter to the Editor by our Chair, Professor Peter McPhee, was published in *The Age* today (17 June 2020, pp. 16-17).

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/scandal-highlights-need-for-effective-watchdog-20200616-h1osqa.html>

Use your powers

Societies have always used statues and other monuments as ways of recognising power and eminence. Civic symbols matter.

In Australia, as everywhere else, there is public debate over whether and which statues should be removed, who should make the decision, and what should be the fate of the statues themselves. Should they be preserved in museums or simply removed?

But there should be no public disagreement about the protection of Indigenous heritage sites, such as Juukan Caves, in the Pilbara, which scandalously were recently destroyed by Rio Tinto.

Last Thursday Federal Parliament undertook to investigate what happened in the Pilbara. But this is not just a retrospective issue. Now we know that there are scores of other vulnerable sites in Western Australia, already approved under section 18 of the WA Aboriginal Heritage Act. Nor is the issue confined to WA.

Commonwealth legislation gives the federal environment minister extensive powers to enact emergency protection provisions in such cases. Why is it not being used?

The Prime Minister could and should use his national cabinet to ensure national and state alignment of Indigenous heritage legislation at this time of heightened historical debate and current controversy.

Peter McPhee, chairman History Council of Victoria