

On Remembrance Day what should we remember? Remarks to Northshore Forum, Sydney, 11 November 2017

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month was the time of the Armistice between the World War I Allies and Germany in 1918. World War I was fought from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918, mobilising 70 million military personnel. Sixteen million died in this war – nine million combatants and seven million civilians.

After World War II, Armistice Day was renamed Remembrance Day to commemorate those who were killed in both World Wars. Today, the loss of Australian lives from all wars is commemorated on Remembrance Day.

Wars are still with us, fuelled by a global arms industry and competing international interests seeking resources and hegemony. So the number of wars to remember is still growing.

So today, on 11 November, we are invited to remember the dead in World War I and subsequent wars. As a lifelong peace activist – but not a pacifist – I would like today to ask: what are we *told to* remember and what *should* we remember?

Remembrance Day is not simply an historical commemoration. It deals with historical events but it contains a clear political agenda and there is a profound dishonesty in what is said and what is not said.

I am sure that many of you saw reports of [the re-enactment of the October 1917 Light Horse charge at Beersheba](#). The flags flew, stirring music played, horses whinnied – and don't we love animals! – descendants in replica uniforms spoke proudly of their ancestors, some wept. Politicians spoke of the heroic fallen who changed the course of war.

All of this was true. But what was unspoken, what was not said?

For example, the land where the charge took place was home to 90 per cent Arabs. Yet no Palestinians were invited to the re-enactment. Israeli flags were flown but the State of Israel did not exist at that time, 1917.

With [the 1917 Balfour Declaration](#), the British colonial power promised Palestine, a land that was not Britain's to promise, to the Zionist movement, ignoring the rights of the indigenous Palestinian people. This declaration paved the road to Palestinian dispossession and the systematic denial to this day of the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

But we are not encouraged to remember things like this. There is often a profound dishonesty in the language of what is said in so much of Remembrance Day ceremonies. It is said the soldiers of World War I and subsequent wars make 'the ultimate sacrifice'. But actually they don't sacrifice themselves; politicians and generals *sacrifice them*. There is a stark difference.

Australian soldiers are described as 'the fallen'. As Ken Inglis wrote in his book [Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape](#), 'soldiers of the Queen did not stagger or sink or topple or have bits blown off, but fell, to become not quite simply the dead but the fallen, who cleanly, heroically, sacrificially gave their lives in war ...'

We speak of those who fell. We do not speak of the fact that they were sent overseas to kill. There is much talk of dying and of sacrifice, but we are almost never asked to remember the killing and the carnage inflicted on distant countries in our name.

In recent years, war has become a dominant feature of Australian history. Rather than recognising our role in conflict – so often as pawns of powerful empires – we have ignored it and transformed our participation into something much more palatable, through the creation of false historical memories.

[Mark McKenna wrote in 2007:](#)

It seems impossible to deny the broader militarisation of our history and culture: the surfeit of jingoistic military histories, the increasing tendency for military displays before football grand finals, the extension of the term Anzac to encompass firefighters and sporting champions, the professionally stage-managed event of the dawn service at Anzac Cove, the burgeoning popularity of battlefield tourism (particularly Gallipoli and the Kokoda Track), the ubiquitous newspaper supplements extolling the virtues of soldiers past and present, and the tendency of the media and both main political parties to view the death of the last World War I veterans as significant national moments.

The myth has become dominant in today's political culture because it has been heavily promoted by recent Australian governments, first by Hawke in the 1980s, then continued by Keating and most heavily promoted by Howard.

A particularly worrying development has been the deliberate targeting of children. Schools across the country are bombarded with free material including films, books, CDs and posters. [Subsidies are provided for trips to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.](#) Essay competitions award winners with fully funded tours of European and Middle Eastern battlefields.

This version of our history conveys the appalling and false ideas that nations are made in war, not in peace, on battlefields not in parliaments; that soldiers not statesmen are the nation's founders; that the bayonet is mightier than the pen. The Department of Veterans' Affairs has provided material that teaches that our national values, national identity, and our development as a nation have been achieved through our military engagement in foreign wars.

In fact, events which have contributed to the formation of the Australian nation have predominantly taken place in peacetime – events including the ending of transportation from 1840, the Eureka Stockade in 1854, the first Australian (Inter-colonial) Trade Union Congress in 1879, the publication of *The Man from Snowy River* in 1895, Federation in 1901, the Harvester minimum wage decision in 1907, women's suffrage around the turn of the 19th century.

The Australian Constitution was created by men who had never been to war, men such as Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton and Charles Kingston. Contrary to the popular idea that Australian values were forged in military service, the majority of Australian nation-builders, including John Curtin and Robert Menzies, never served in war.

However, we should never forget that this process also includes 40 000 years of Indigenous history with the final two hundred plus years of the Frontier Wars, murder, dispossession, exclusion and impoverishment. These clearly were events which were not peaceful and which had a profound impact on the Australian character.

Militarising our history helps create an environment conducive to war, making it easier for Australian governments to commit to conflict and harder for critics to engage in a serious national debate. The

heroic image of the Digger makes it easier to politically justify wars our powerful friend wants to wage and harder to question the costs of war, both human lives and billions of dollars.

To challenge our involvement in wars is demonised as cowardly attacks on the men and women in the front line. The prestige of the armed forces shields the politicians from legitimate scrutiny. The relentless focus on our military history reinforces war, violence and military solutions as key options to resolve international conflict.

The packaged version of the past is used to promote unquestioning respect for the military and acceptance of military action as an effective and legitimate way to solve problems. We are taught to see the military as a feasible and successful mode of conflict resolution. Criticism is buried beneath the compulsion to be patriotic and stand by our troops. It provides a means by which Australian governments neutralise dissent about any commitment to war.

The majority of the Australian people did not support Australia's involvement in the 2003 Iraq War but, once the commitment had been made, the Howard government made it difficult to critique the war – difficult on the grounds that the men and women deployed to fight in it must be supported.

There have been valiant peace movements in Europe and in Australia who campaigned for solutions that were better than war. They were arrested, demonised, swept aside by jingoism, simply ignored. Yet they were right. But we are not invited to remember them, even when the same situation arose over Iraq, even when the same situation faces us today over the Korean Peninsula.

Criticising the myths is a serious thing, for it is criticism of the evil and folly of war and of Australia's role as a pawn in international conflict. It is criticism of Australian defence policy and exorbitant defence spending – now \$87 million every single day – and criticism of our relationship with the United States.

In Australia, the decision to send young men and women to kill and be killed in war [can be made by the Prime Minister alone](#). We pride ourselves on being a democratic country but, as the events of 2014 and 2015 showed, a prime minister can still send Australian troops into action without democratic constraint, parliamentary debate, or public accountability.

The late former Prime Minister [Malcolm Fraser wrote in 2015](#):

The way we went to war in 2003, as one of three members of the Coalition of the willing, with the United States and the United Kingdom, represented a betrayal of democratic standards and a betrayal of Australian values ...

The closeness of our relationship with the United States ... means that we no longer have an independent capacity to stay out of America's wars ... When those hard-hitting, three-service forces in Darwin are used to support a conflict in which America is involved, and when Pine Gap is used to target not only drones, but advanced American weapons systems, how can an Australian Prime Minister stand up in the Parliament and say Australia is going to pass this one by? The Prime Minister would not be believed. Australia could not stop America using those facilities.

Very many Australians believe that it is essential and urgent that the power to declare war or to stay at peace be transferred from the Executive to Parliament. But none of all this will be mentioned in official Remembrance Day ceremonies.

All of what I have said means no disrespect to soldiers who fought and died. They were told they had to defeat the Hun on the Western Front or the gooks in Vietnam or the rag heads in Iraq and

Afghanistan. They obeyed and did their best in indescribably appalling situations. The guilty are the ones who sent them, who lied to them about why they were there, and who sacrificed them for economic and political advantage

On Armistice Day, the flags fly, the solemn music plays, the veterans, the widows and the grandchildren wear the medals and weep, the leaders speak of 'fallen heroes'. There are headstones and wreaths and memorials and speeches. They promise 'We will remember them'.

But we hear nothing about the wounded and maimed, the countless men stricken by shell shock, by post-traumatic stress disorder; the disfigured men who were shunned; the rampant alcoholism and morphine addiction; the terrified kids and battered wives, and the suicides.

Perhaps it is easier to remember the fallen with a poppy and a parade than to confront the reality. Perhaps it is politically more expedient. So we must ask on Remembrance Day: what should we remember?

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