

2009 Anniversary Oration

Australian War Memorial Anniversary Oration delivered by Professor Kim Beazley AC^[1] on 11 November 2009, at the Australian War Memorial

Check against delivery

Remembrance Day pauses the nation briefly in reflection at the eleventh hour. The First World War's allies remember their dead and those who sacrificed in our defence in what historian John Keegan described as a "cruel and unnecessary war." Both adjectives correctly encapsulate the conflict overall. The first certainly does in Australia's case: the second has to be mitigated by the considerations that our principal ally having engaged, strategic calculation made it important that we did. I shall say more on that later.

I suspect that most Australians, as they stand and reflect these days, (unless they are historically minded) probably think Remembrance Day is a brief reprise of the matters we consider on the 25th of April, ANZAC Day. That day is powerfully salient in national memory. It has its critics but it is our one unconfected, popular moment of deep commemoration on the national calendar. That does not diminish the significance of the other days we recognise, holidays or not, whether they acknowledge events of war, social movements, religion, pursuit of peace, achievement and sorrow. They are a product properly of interaction between governments and their advocates.

ANZAC Day was a product of our soldiers demand and followed immediately on the events which inspired it. Its creation is encapsulated in a letter home from then Brigadier-General John Monash, who became our greatest soldier and arguably our greatest Australian, following a service for his brigade in Egypt on 25 April 1916 as 'this famous day...Our Day.' Peter Pederson in a speech earlier this year, pointed out that the Gallipoli men at that service wore a blue ribbon on their right breast with an additional red one for those who were at the landing.

From then until recently, organisation of commemoration was entirely in the hands of the returned men and women. That is shared now with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Council of this Memorial. Substantial public expenditure helps keep memory alive, notably since the 1995 'Australia Remembers' campaign, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of World War II. For the War Memorial, this is a year round effort with its evocative displays, its near pilgrimage status for the public, and its superb educational and popular outreach.

However, ANZAC Day does not need this for its status in popular regard. Its origins were popular in the sense it was acclaimed and claimed by soldiers as they campaigned. After the war its proclamation as a holiday was an important aspect of the returned service personnel's memory of those they left behind. It was done over the vigorous objection of the business community, very influential with the conservative government.

It is impossible now to put ourselves in the minds of the Australians who fought and/or lived through the First World War. That decade's historiography is characterised by the prosperity which floated on unsustainable borrowing, the industrial struggles of the Union

movement, which took on genuine national character with the creation of the ACTU, and social loosening.

But Australia was a nation in shock. We had experienced massive casualties in the world's first war of industrial proportions. The returned men were haunted by the ghosts of those left behind and the ghosts to come. Some 60,000, still more than half the total casualties suffered by Australia in war, have their name on this memorial.

Had they then the more generous qualification in time terms we have now, some 60,000 more would be on the plaques. War related injuries, physical and psychological, saw off that number in the decade or so after the war. Their numbers should probably include another great Australian, commander Pompey Elliot who suicided during the Depression. Ross McMullin's biography of him reveals that nothing in his personal circumstances induced his action. The best explanation is that of his grief that the returned men whose livelihoods he had fought so hard for, were rolled over in many cases by the economic crisis.

The men who fought for each other in war fought for each other in peace. But some of what they fought for, like the soldier settler schemes, often deepened their emiseration. Their signature organisations were not just the RSL as it is now entitled but also Legacy, created in 1923. My mother's father died of war causes in 1923 when she was two. To emphasise the point I made earlier, his name is on the West Australian War Memorial in Kings' Park. It is not on the memorial here. The combination of my grandmother's war widow pension and Legacy sustained my mother through to an unusual university degree in WA and a diploma at Melbourne University. Hers is not a singular story.

The returned services personnel of this war and subsequent wars kept memory alive. Recently, however, others have joined them. Well before government expanded the hand of DVA, young Australians of no war service counted themselves in. Since the 1980s, the Gallipoli pilgrimage has joined the young Australian travelling trail. 'Let's meet at Gallipoli,' then became an invitation for reassembly after dispersal through Europe and the Middle East. I have seen ample evidence of this at three visits to Gallipoli in 1990, 2000 and 2005. At the first they had the opportunity to see the last visit of the Red and Blue Ribbon men. Not one of those survivors was there to trumpet war or the strategic and tactical wisdom of the campaign. No veterans ever have, including those in 1916. They were there for their mates. Government contingency planning for the trip entailed loading coffins onto the transport aircraft, should some of the old diggers not complete it. They were worried the old soldiers might see them. The truth is at least some of them hoped they would die there on hallowed ground. None of them did but they weren't there in 2000.

But it was the kids who struck me. They were not there because of DVA urgings. They were there because they did think it was part of being Australian. It was notable that at the British and French grave sites, far more numerous than the Australians, there were only official parties. This sentiment is not confected, it is real. There was protest back here that the night before the Dawn service, in this accommodation-challenged remote part of Turkey, many of the kids sang and slept around the grave sites. I would lay London to a brick that if the kids below the ground were permitted to trade increased time in purgatory to go above ground to commune with the kids of this generation, they would have done it. I would take a similar shade of odds that none of the kids above ground would have been scared by the experience. They would simply have introduced and shared the six pack.

In the last 20 odd years, travel to Gallipoli has not simply been an ANZAC Day phenomenon. Nor is fascination with the story and reverence for the Day just a traveller's tale. I noted in my years as an MP attending ceremonies every ANZAC Day here and abroad, large turn outs at major and suburban services of young families and young people. Much of this predated the growth in official interest since the Keating government's 'Australia Remembers'.

It requires some explanation but not much. At its heart lies the popular origins of the original celebration. It is at its core the viscerally felt national day. It was subdued briefly during the Vietnam War. How much this was regretted was evidenced by the crowds which attended the 1987 'Welcome Home' parade for the Vietnam veterans. I would argue that the growing attendances reflected the much more intensely self-confident Australian nationalism of the last three decades. This is an evolutionary process. A transition from a sentiment of being independent Britons to having grown a distinct national culture. Politicians will ride the sentiment and attempt to channel it. They cannot create it. Nor in the end can they succeed in appropriating it politically. It is shared too widely across political and social divides.

If ANZAC Day is so seminal, how do we ensure all of us feel included and that what is commemorated is broader than the service personnel and their descendents, vital though they are? Marilyn Lake is one of our best historians. Part of her work includes war and memory. In a lecture in Melbourne in the lead up to ANZAC Day this year, she said:

Amongst other things the myth of ANZAC requires us to forget, first, the gender and racial exclusions, the centrality of manhood, race and colonial anxiety to its begetting. Secondly the long history of pacifism and anti-war movements in Australia, the historic opposition to militarist values in Australia. Thirdly the stories of national aspiration and identity based on civil and political society, not military society, the democratic social experiments and visions of social justice that once defined Australia. And fourth, that at Gallipoli we fought for Empire not nation, symbolising our continuing colonial condition.

Having watched my three daughters through their year 12 finals in history, the youngest last week, I have to say the curriculum certainly encompasses Marilyn Lake's broad agenda. With the exception of the pacifist tradition, most can be brought into memory on the Day under the broader version of Ben Chifley's concept of 'things worth fighting for'. Further, formal recognition of much of it would be useful. As a social democratic politician I am proud of the fact that Lenin thought the pre-World War I social experiment potent enough to write a political pamphlet critiquing it, when my tendency was described as 'altogether liberal and altogether bourgeois'.

Undoubtedly the original interpretations of Australian national character articulated by Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and C. E. W. Bean, in relief as much as celebration, as they assessed the Australian battlefield performance focussed on masculine attributes and virtues and emphasised essential 'Britishness' in the troops. But ANZAC Day is not simply about a landing in Gallipoli. By the time it was commemorated as a public holiday, it was about the entire effort in World War I. Since then it has commemorated participation in a multiplicity of engagements in very different strategic circumstances in very different eras socially and politically. The breadth of what can be commemorated should be made very clear. I would like to discuss here three points in paragraph I quoted from Marilyn Lake: "...empire not nation, symbolising our continuing colonial condition" and "the gender and racial exclusions."

Before I went on my last visit to Gallipoli in 2005 I said this in a speech at the Lowy Institute:

I'd like to close by looking forward a week and back 90 years. This time next week on ANZAC Day, I will be in person where every Australian will be in spirit. I will be at Gallipoli.

The ANZAC story is so rich in drama, such a source of national icons, that we tend to overlook the lessons that it can teach us about strategic policy and the responsibilities of leaders. Like all legends, the ANZAC story takes on an air of inevitability. It is impossible to imagine a world in which Australians did not go ashore that morning at Gallipoli. But there was nothing inevitable about it. They were there because of policy decisions – strategic decisions – taken by Australian political leaders.

The Gallipoli legend today minimises their decisions. It suggests that Australians found themselves on the Turkish shore that day because their political leaders were too unimaginative, too supine, too emotionally tied to Britain to see that that this was someone else's war, in which Australian had no part.

This is a travesty of the truth. A truer account of the strategic decisions of the Gallipoli story deserves to be known. Australians as a people thought carefully about their security in the decades before 1914. As the strategic challenge from Germany grew from the 1880s, they recognised that Britain would be less and less able to continue guaranteeing Australia's security. And they realised that as Britain started looking for allies in Europe and Asia, its interests would sometimes diverge from Australia's. We started to see ourselves, not as a mere strategic appendage of empire, but as an active partner in imperial security. As we had our own unique interests and perspectives, and our own responsibilities.

We cannot understand the decisions of 1914, and we cannot understand Gallipoli, if we do not understand that Australia had compelling, direct and distinctively Australian strategic reasons to play its part in helping to ensure that British power was not eclipsed. We needed Britain to defend us from what we saw – rather presciently as it turned out- as direct threats closer to home.

The pre-war Army and Navy was raised and equipped with a structure to which the British objected. The clash of opinion revolved around Australian perceptions of what was required in this region as opposed to British views on imperial defence. The 'truer account' with regard to strategy itself is contained in Neville Meaney's book, *Australia and World Crisis: 1914-23*, published this year. His is at last an account of the high politics of this period.

Meaney perceives dual and parallel strategic calculations around discussions of what we should contribute to the war effort. One revolved around Empire responsibilities, the other around the long and at times uniquely Australian 'cold war' with Japan. The perceived demands of the two underpinned clashes of opinion among Australian decision makers. They surfaced in public form in arguments during the conscription debates. Preserving manpower in the event of a Japanese conflict was an arrow in the anti-conscription quiver. Had the war stalemated or worse still, been lost, it is conceivable that the minority of Japanese politicians who argued for an alliance with Germany throughout the war would have been in a position to make dramatic changes in Australian strategic circumstances as their perspective was vindicated. The war was cruel and for the Great Powers, unnecessary. For humanity it was devastating and left conditions which promoted an even

more devastating conflict. In sending Bolshevism to the top of the Socialist pile, it massively complicated the egalitarian struggle of the social democrats. Once Britain was engaged, however, participation in the war was necessary for Australia.

The Second World War saw massive steps in the sophistication of the strategic understanding of Australian leaders and an even stronger focus on self-reliant elements of our participation. We were in something of a strategic cul-de-sac as far as our allies were concerned. But not for us. We could play no role in the central strategic gambit as we did on the Western Front. There the independent minded insistence that we should sustain a separate Australian army corps saw us play in 1918 arguably, in global history terms, our most significant role. By 1918 the British Army was very good and we were an effective part of its spearhead, playing a central role in decisive battles. One of the German intelligence metrics then was if you found Australians on your front you could expect to be attacked within 48 hours. Supine imperial loyalty did not see the Australian army a separate entity. National pride was critical but also long term strategic calculations.

I would argue that the readily identified Australian performance on that front at least entered Japanese calculations in 1942-43, when the military hierarchy argued the pros and cons of invading Australia. In the *General Outline of Policy On Future War Guidance*, agreed at the Japanese Imperial Headquarters in early 1942, invasion of Australia was rejected on the following reasons put forward by the Army General Staff:

Australia covers an area about twice the size of China Proper and has a population of about 7,000,000. Its land communications are by no means well developed. If the invasion is attempted, the Australians, in view of their national character, would resist to the end. Also, because the geographic conditions of Australia present numerous difficulties, in a military sense, it is apparent that a military venture in that country would be a difficult one...[\[2\]](#)

During the Second World War, MacArthur had more Australian troops under his command than American until 1944. Curtin, Evatt and Chifley fought hard and innovatively to give Australia a voice in the conduct of the war and the peace. They did not give in to elements of allied strategic thinking they perceived as inimical to Australian interests and sought after the war, in social, industrial and educational policy as well as military, to create a self-reliance that would promote survival.

The subsequent engagements whose participants we too commemorate on ANZAC Day did not involve such stakes. The arguments however, have not changed - what contribution do we need to make to ensure a secure Australian environment and international situation as compatible as possible with values we think important? In what way should we influence allies to our point of view?

None of this suggests our judgements have always been correct. None of it suggests that neither we nor our allies have avoided profound mistakes. Gallipoli was one of them. Our serving personnel have on occasion in a tactical context been sacrificed needlessly and families emiserated for a then no good purpose. Overall, however, whatever the surface simplification of the propaganda, war has been deeply considered by Australian decision-makers motivated by an effort to get to grips with the national interest in the first instance. To be able to do that is one of the reasons the colonies federated. This fact alone gives us all a stake in ANZAC Day. As a democracy we all share in the purpose whether we agree with judgements, general or particular.

That brings us to the questions of gender and race. It is true that the first iconic image of ANZAC was masculine and if that was all that was possible to draw from Australia's wartime experience, it would be inadequate for a national commemorative day. Except as a discussion in historical context, that image plays no role now. I would agree, nevertheless, that we need to draw the gender feature more broadly both historically and in contemporary terms.

Most school history curricula when dealing with the two major wars does cover women's contributions and experience. It is also honest about limitations in participation that did reflect gender discrimination. Particularly in World War II, however, women's contributions were massive and reflected both the character of Australia's war and the achievements to that point of the women's struggle. There are some social and geopolitical aspects of Australia's situation little discussed which if highlighted, would strengthen gender equality in the legend.

Of the warring societies in World War II, Australia was the most mobilised. This seems extraordinary since one of our allies and two of our enemies were totalitarian powers. In the case of the enemies, women were largely sidelined except as victims for reasons of ideology. In the case of the Soviet Union they were mobilised where they could be but a savage invasion complicated the participation of huge swathes of the country.

In Australia focus is placed on the Women's Auxiliary Services founded in 1941 and the much greater array of duties they performed. As well as nursing, as in the First World War, they played important roles in transport, administrative elements of the organisation of the armed forces, signals and signals intelligence, support of air operations and a multitude of noncombat tasks. By 1943, 843,000 Australian women were in paid employment including some 160,000 in skilled industrial occupations. 33% were in the work force by 1945. Most achieved an increase in women's wages and some 8,000 achieved equality in pay. Single women were civilly conscripted. Married women were almost all virtually engaged in voluntary activity. The Women's Land Army was critical to wartime production of food.

The great debates and stories of World War II from El Alamein, Tobruk, Kokoda, Coral Sea, New Guinea, the air campaign in Europe, the sea battles, the landings in the islands etc, detail heroism but few women. However, they are only part of the Australian story.

The Australian story is Australia itself. We were a front line state, a fortress, an immobile aircraft carrier. We anchored the southern front of the fight back against the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Here total mobilisation was critical. We were feeding, arming and clothing many more than just ourselves. When the task got too burdensome for our small population and the choice had to be made between limiting production at home of our base elements or reducing the front line troops, the government chose to reduce the troops and demobilised two divisions. When the Americans complained about this the British general staff intervened, showering their American counterparts with statistics which showed how vital Australian production was to the war effort. The movement of some Australian men was away from direct engagement with the enemy to where women were engaged in producing the sinews of war.

Useful research work might be done on why women were so readily engaged. I believe such a study of the ready acceptability of women's participation and the skills women brought to the task would reflect capacities and attitudes that were at least in part a product of fifty years of feminist struggle for social and political equality which achieved victories here, earlier than in most parts of the western world. This is not to say that gender

equity prevailed and that men accepted that a married woman's place was other than in the home. But these things are relative and by comparison with most we were advanced.

Now the issue scarcely arises. Conflicts in the Persian Gulf are producing female combat veterans as attitudes and technology integrate our forces. The Navy is effectively integrated. On my one trip to the Persian Gulf, I spent time on board a ship where the Principal Warfare Officer was a woman. As I observed the crews going out on the ribs to intercept smugglers they contained women fully armed. I remember a delightful conversation with one of them on the quarterdeck, the only place we could smoke. "I shouldn't be doing this," she said, "but the Ex O smokes so I can get into serious sucking up to him." Good political thinking in one so young. It brought to mind an earlier experience I had taking Secretary Dick Cheney to Pine Gap for a briefing. The shift commander did the briefing and as the commander spoke I remember Cheney turning to me and saying in amazement "She's an Aussie".

Perspectives have changed now. Recognition of the Women's Land Army provides an example of this change. A better geopolitical understanding of Australia's World War II situation would change them further. There is no need to consider the modern ANZAC legend a gender exclusive one.

Nor is there any justification for perceiving the day as racially exclusive. Indigenous Australians have fought in every Australian war, despite efforts to prevent it in the first. The many Aboriginal servicemen and ex-servicemen I have met are immensely proud of their service. Aboriginals provided labour, service personnel and irregular surveillance units in our north. We were largely ignorant of our northern reaches in World War II when suddenly they appeared a possible front line. Perhaps anticipating reaction to our shocking mistreatment of them, some thought it likely they would become a fifth column. None did and the first Japanese prisoner taken on Australia soil was by a party of indigenous Australians. Our wartime effort at our most vulnerable point was heavily dependent upon Aboriginal involvement. Again, an adjustment in appreciation of the character of our wartime engagement would bring indigenous Australians more to the fore in our ANZAC commemoration. They were among the guardians at the gate of our fortress.

Finally a word about frontier wars. Until recently Australian historiography has denied indigenous Australians the dignity of resistance. That factor has always been a part of native American pride. In the mid and late 19th century they had the best light cavalry of the American frontier. Indigenous Australians were skilled guerrilla fighters. Until the New Zealand Wars they largely fought British regiments.

Henry Reynolds' pioneering work in this area has been picked up by John Coates in his *Atlas of Australian Wars*. Until the advent of breach loading rifles the military had a hard time of it in those struggles. An Aboriginal warrior could launch half a dozen spears in the time it took to load a 'brown bess' and they were effective over much the same distance. Also the sharp-eyed indigenous could see a flintlock engage before the arrival of ball and sound which permitted evasive action.

This memorial's mandate is foreign wars. There needs to be, on the basis of consultation with the indigenous people, the creation of interpretation centres and memorials to give more recognition to the frontier wars. That is not part of ANZAC Day but there is room for other commemoration. Indigenous Australians' service is emphatically part of ANZAC Day as is an appreciation of the contribution to strengthening our northern defences, which continues to this day. So many Aborigines have said to me it would be so much easier for

them to feel included if our national day were ANZAC Day not Australia Day. They cannot sympathetically regard the foundation day of the colony of New South Wales as a good thing. I enjoy Australia Day, observe it and look forward to presiding at ceremonies in Washington for it. However, as I perform ceremonial tasks on ANZAC Day in Washington I will have the additional comfort in the back of my mind that there will be indigenous Australians wholeheartedly involved in commemoration here.

Australians have voted with their feet and hearts on ANZAC Day. They do not need the DVA to devise their appreciation though many are helped by the work it does. There is one key element in their hearts and it does not involve bombast. It is that there is something special in sacrifice. As we consider patriotism there is a deeply honoured place for those who have taken theirs to a point where they are prepared to depart this earth as a demonstration of devotion.

1. [^](#) Kim Beazley is Winthrop Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Western Australia.
2. [^](#)Hattori, Takushiro, *Dai To-A Senso Zenshi*, Tokyo, 1953, Part III, p. 292, quoted in Annex C, *Threats to Australia's Security: Their Nature and Probability*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981).

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