

Address to Marrickville Council*

by Jon Atkins

Thank you Mayor and thank you councillors for this opportunity to speak.

I'm secretary of the Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign (GCPC). I wish to oppose Clr Macri's Notice of Motion and to support the public debate going ahead on 21st April as planned.

I note that Clr Macri hasn't offered any reasons for his Notice of Motion. Nor has he or the Gallipoli Centenary Committee provided any reasons or argument for initially rejecting the proposal for holding a public debate – merely that they “did not feel” it was within the scope of the ‘Marrickville Remembers’ program.

I won't try and guess what these reasons are. Rather in the limited time available, I will briefly talk about (1) our Peace Campaign's objectives, (2) the importance of encouraging informed discussion and debate about Australia's WW1 history and the influence that the Anzac legend has on our memory of that catastrophic war, and (3) why it is thoroughly appropriate to hold a public debate at a time when public attention is well and truly focussed on the Gallipoli Centenary commemorations.

(1) Our Peace Campaign's Objectives

Our website clearly lists our campaign's objectives. These include critical reflection on the Anzac legend (in particular such contested notions that the Gallipoli campaign defined us as people and as a nation and the fact that this over-emphasis on military endeavours has crowded out our nation building political and social achievements between Federation and 1914 e.g conciliation and arbitration, old age and invalid pensions, and notably, the granting of full political rights to women – giving women the vote was a world historic first. Achievements such as these should be commemorated.

We are also calling for Richardsons Lookout to be co-named a Peace and Reconciliation Park and have welcome Council's support for this to happen, subject to the outcome of community consultation.

As well, we are promoting a Veterans' Welfare Project. This project calls for more affordable housing and better targeted welfare services to be provided to veterans by both government agencies and RSL sub-branches and RSL Clubs.

(2) The importance of encouraging informed discussion and debate about Australia's WW1 history

Our educational campaign has included a successful public forum held at Sydney University in early August. This was co-hosted by the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and featured an address by Prof Joan Beaumont, author of the acclaimed *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*.

We are currently promoting a history resource within secondary schools called *The Enduring Effects of War*. This comprises a set of lesson plans developed by the History Teachers' Association of Victoria in partnership with the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. Its design is compatible with the National Curriculum.

We have also encouraged research into Marrickville's local history during the WW1 – in particular on the conscription referenda and the social divisions the war caused locally.

According to Clinton Johnston, Coordinator History Services, Marrickville Library, the historical exhibition will cover aspects of opposition to the war and to conscription locally. We welcome this greater focus on the 'homefront' – an aspect of WW1 that has tended to be overlooked in past commemorations.

We also congratulate the Marrickville Library staff for hosting the talk by Peter FitzSimons on his latest book *Gallipoli* on 3rd November. Hopefully the library will promote more events like these in the coming months.

The proposed debate of 21st April complements these events. During the Gallipoli Centenary our aim is to increase public awareness about the causes and human costs of WW1, how Australia made the decision to become involved in that war, the extent of domestic opposition, the arguments for and against conscription, the social divisions the war generated on the 'homefront', and importantly, the lessons we can learn from this human catastrophe in order that we can find alternative means of resolving conflict in the future.

Histories of Australia's Great War that propel their readers into the trenches actually hinder such a goal. That is why GCPC is keen to promote histories of the Great War such Joan Beaumont's *Broken Nation*, *Australians in the Great War* and Douglas Newton's *Hell-bent: Australia's Leap into the Great War*.

Douglas Newtown argues that British cabinet's choice to enter the war was a "very close-run thing". He points out that at "the height of the diplomatic crisis leading to war, it looked very much like Britain would choose neutrality. Only very late in the evening of Tuesday 4 August did a small clique in the British cabinet finally engineer a declaration of war against Germany."

Newton reveals that Australia's political leaders, "deep in the throes of a federal election campaign, competed with one another in a love-of-empire auction." He shows that they leapt ahead of events in London. In addition to offering to transfer the new Royal Australian Navy to the British Admiralty, "on Monday 3 August, an inner group of the Australian cabinet, egged on by the Governor-General, offered an expeditionary force of 20,000 men, to serve anywhere, for any objective, under British command — *some forty hours before the British cabinet made up its mind.*" (My emphasis).

As Newton points out: "Australia's leaders thereby lost the chance to set limits, to weigh objectives, or to insist upon consultation. They needlessly exposed Australian soldiers and their families to the full horror of the mechanised slaughter that was to come. They were hell-bent — and they got there."¹

The question arises: Did this act help the pro-war faction in Asquith's Liberal Government win the debate to send Britain to war?

Many would argue that there are lasting lessons to be learnt from these events. Some would argue that we are repeating the mistakes from the past right now at the behest of a different Empire. Many would argue that Australia compromises both its sovereignty and its capacity to contribute to world peace by adopting such a servile foreign policy posture. Whatever your stance, these are important matters deserving debate.

(3) Why it is appropriate to hold a public debate on 21st April.

There are at least three good reasons for holding the debate on 21st April rather than in May.

First, it is in keeping with a primary objective of the National Anzac Centenary Program which is to encourage “all Australians to reflect upon and learn more about Australia’s military history, its costs and its impacts on our nation”.

Second, holding the public debate on 21st April is likely to maximise public engagement and thereby fulfil a key objective of the National Anzac Centenary Program.

Third, while the event is not part of Council’s official program, a public debate on WW1 and how Australia remembers that human catastrophe is well and truly compatible with genuine remembrance.

Let me explain by quoting from Peter Underwood’s Anzac Day speech on 25th April this year.

At Hobart’s Cenotaph, the former Governor of Tasmania had this to say: “In the spirit of true remembrance”, the centennial year of the start of the War to end all Wars “should be spent examining and talking about the causes of war and how we got involved in wars. We should spend less time studying Simpson’s donkey and more time looking at why we were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for so long. All this is not in order to criticise past decision makers, but in remembrance of the dead, to help us avoid doing it again in some other place, simply because we failed to examine all the alternative means of resolving conflict.”²

Peter Underwood also said: “All our remembrances and honours are meaningless, unless we also vow to become resolute about peace because that is what those whom we remember and honour on (Anzac Day) thought they were dying for.”³

“Becoming resolute about peace” – that’s what GCPC stands for. It is also what the public debate will be dedicated to.

In keeping with the principle of free speech, we therefore strongly recommend that the public debate takes place on 21st April as planned.

We thank councillors for their support to date.

25th Nov 2014

** An edited version of this speech limited to three minutes was presented to Marrickville Council.*

¹ Quotes from Douglas Newton, author’s summary of *Hell-bent: Australia’s Leap into the Great War*, Scribe, Melbourne, Jul 2014, on Penguin Books Australia’s website:

<http://www.penguin.com.au/products/9781925106060/hell-bent-australia-s-leap-great-war>

² Peter Underwood, Anzac Day Speech 2014,

http://www.govhouse.tas.gov.au/sites/default/files/speeches/anzac_day.pdf

³ Peter Underwood, Anzac Day Speech 2013,

http://www.govhouse.tas.gov.au/sites/default/files/anzac_day_2013.pdf