

Speech by Jon Atkins
Anzac Day Reflection
Peace Park, Katoomba NSW 2780
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What makes Anzac Day Reflections distinctive?

Anzac Day has gained its prominence as a result of becoming Australia's principal moment of remembrance for all the lives lost in the nation's numerous foreign wars.

Few people would query the importance and the need for such an occasion, regardless of the nature, the cause or the legitimacy of particular conflicts.

It is therefore fitting that we come together on this day to remember Australian casualties during WW1, including the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign, as well as in all subsequent wars and conflicts.

Here I would like to emphasise just three few points that make Anzac Day Reflections distinctive.

The first point I would like to make is this – the tributes paid to the victims of WW1 (and other wars) need to be inclusive.

When remembering Australian losses in foreign wars, we should also remember all Indigenous Australians who lost their lives in these wars, including the 250 to 300 Indigenous Australians who perished in WW1 out of an estimated 1,000 to 1,300 who enlisted. It's shameful that it is only in recent times that Indigenous servicemen have been fully recognised by the Australian War Memorial.

Peter Stanley, former head historian at the Australian War Memorial made this point recently at the Blackheath History Forum.

It is also important to pay tribute to other casualties of the war: those that returned with debilitating psychological or physical injuries.

As well, we need to acknowledge the suffering that war caused on the home front, especially among the loved ones and relatives of those killed, maimed and traumatised by the horrors of war.

And not least, this event also recognises all those who campaigned against the war, together with those who opposed conscription. Many of these people were vilified and punished by the State for the principled stand they took.

The second point to be made is this – Anzac Day commemorations should actively encourage hard questions being raised about the Gallipoli campaign and other military engagements.

The Peace Collective would argue that asking a range of hard questions about Australia's engagement in past wars and conflicts is essential to genuine remembrance.

Our argument is that we need to learn from past military tragedies so that we can minimise them occurring in the future. Surely this is an important way of honouring our war dead.

Given Australia's propensity to engage in foreign wars, we believe it is appropriate to ask the following questions:

- Why did we so readily go to war?
- What was achieved?
- Was engagement in our long term national interest?
- Were our wars worth the expense all the lives lost?

Official Anzac Day commemorations these days tend to avoid serious consideration of such questions.

Rather what these commemorations focus on is how our service men and women fought, not why they fought. We examine tactics rather than strategy.

And when 'sacrifice and heroism' are invoked, as they often are, any questioning about the objectives being served is pushed aside.

In this context, it can never be suggested that the sacrifice of life served no justifiable purpose.

The third point is this – we need to reject all the “add-ons” that now seem inseparable from Anzac Day commemorations.

What I am referring to here is the Anzac legend and the historical distortions that this myth entails, such as:

- The nation was born as Gallipoli;
- It was our first blood sacrifice;
- Our national identity was established in war time;
- We fought at Gallipoli for freedom and democracy, and
- Our national values are military values.

Contrary to these historical falsehoods, many historians are at pains to point out that the Australian colonies federated in 1901 and that our national identity and

democratic values were forged in peacetime, prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914.

It is the Peace Collective's contention that the promotion of the Anzac legend, by distorting our history and discouraging critical inquiry, has helped to suppress public resistance to Australia's engagement in foreign wars in the service of "great and powerful friends" – in the past, this was the British Empire – today, it's the most belligerent of nations, the USA.