

## RaH Lismore Anzac Eve speech, 24 April

David Stephens

### Why we should downsize Anzac

I want to present five arguments why we should downsize Anzac, why we should make it less important in our national life than it is now and as it looks like becoming in the next four years.

I am not talking about Anzac Day but about the Anzac tradition, or myth, or legend, that ever-widening khaki thread that runs through our Australian national tapestry.

My first argument for downsizing Anzac I call the parochial insensitivity argument.

Our war commemoration is parochial and insensitive because it takes very little account of the broader human impact of war.

Raw statistics are not the only way of supporting this argument, of course (and every soldier killed in war is a tragedy) but let's look at kill counts.

How does 102 000 Australian war deaths – let's say 100 000 in the twentieth century – compare with total deaths in wars around the world in that twentieth century?

Not just deaths of people in uniform but counting civilian deaths as well.

Remember that in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, they tend to have wars in their own backyards – rather than thousands of miles away from home, like us – so they have more dead civilians.

One reputable estimate of total deaths in wars and conflicts in the twentieth century is 231 million.

That makes Australia's 100 000 deaths around 0.04 per cent of the total.

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Our common humanity demands that we in Australia broaden our perspective on war and deaths in war to recognise the impacts of war beyond our own kith and kin.

Those massive numbers of deaths – the numbers that we gloss over as we commemorate our 102 000 individual Australian tragedies – lead into another point.

We say that beneath our commemoration of war there is an abhorrence of war.

We insist that we do not glorify war.

These denials often come, however, as add-ons to moving, patriotic, feel-good – or at least bitter-sweet – ceremonies with lots of flags, eloquent speeches, remembrance of heroic acts, sonorous hymns and wide-eyed children.

Rather than routinely repeating, as an afterthought to nostalgic commemoration, that mantra about not glorifying war, would it not be a more effective argument against war to highlight the impacts of war on civilian populations, the great bulk of that 231 million dead?

My second argument I call the strangulation argument and it runs like this.

We do military history so well in Australia, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Australian War Memorial and the various state memorials, through History Teachers' Associations, through the endless flood of military history books, good, bad and indifferent, through movies and mini-series, through commercial hucksters flogging Anzac cruises and Gallipoli memorabilia, through anniversaries of this battle and that, new memorials, travelling exhibitions, re-enactments, performance art, symphonies ... and sheer bloody palaver, that there is a risk that some Australians, particularly young Australians, by the centenary of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, will think that really there is nothing in Australian history worth noticing except what occurs on battlefields.

Yet we are a much more interesting country than we will seem if that khaki thread strangles all of the other threads of our national history.

Australian history is made by women, men, individuals, families, artists, philosophers, scientists, business people, unionists, public servants, soldiers and politicians.

Australian history is to the credit – and the fault – of all of us, not just our Diggers.

My third argument is the devaluation argument, devaluation of the men and women who died.

The type of commemoration exercise we engage in nowadays is really less about them – the Diggers – and more about us – about Australians now.

Michael McGirr, a former Jesuit priest and gifted writer, said this in 2001; I am sure that the tendencies he observed then have increased since.

McGirr used the term 'creeping Anzacism' to describe

the way in which the remembrance of war is moving from the personal to the public sphere and, with that, from a description of something unspeakable to something about which you can never say enough.

As fewer and fewer Australians actually know somebody who fought in World War I or World War II the commemoration of war has changed from a quiet remembrance of other people to an unrestrained endorsement of ourselves.

As ideology comes to replace history, there are fewer and fewer faces to go with the stories.

They have been replaced by a lather of clichés, most of which are as much about filling a void in the narcissistic present as lending dignity to the past.

People now seem to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves.

They aren't.

The dead deserve more respect than to be used to make ourselves feel larger.

My fourth argument is the bellicosity argument.

'Bellicosity' means 'an inclination to fight or quarrel'.

Hugh White of the ANU has argued that the Anzac tradition encourages us to fight without thinking.

I paraphrase his argument as follows.

First, 'soft' wars over the last 30 years – that is, wars with relatively low casualties – have made Australians more bellicose.

Secondly, we regard the Australian–American alliance as vital to our national security so we are always susceptible to phone calls from the White House, seeking our involvement somewhere overseas.

Thirdly, Australians traditionally have not focused sharply on the purposes of war, either beforehand or in retrospect.

We tend to go off to fight without worrying too much about whether and how fighting serves our national interest.

Listen to Prime Minister Abbott just last month addressing the troops returned from Afghanistan:

[Y]ou have fought for the universal decencies of mankind – the rights of the weak against the strong, the rights of the poor against the rich and the rights of all to strive for the very best they can.

That's what Australians do; we always have and we always will.

Australians don't fight to conquer; we fight to help, to build and to serve.

Australians, in this view, are not militaristic but we are altruistic warriors.

And, if you have that much altruism, you don't need to be militaristic.

Next, says Professor White, there is the reinforcing role of the Anzac tradition.

While we steer away from why we fight, we focus sharply on how we fight, on the details of battles and the experiences of soldiers.

Professor White refers to 'the way Australians' intense focus on military history, centred on the Gallipoli campaign, has shaped, and in some ways distorted, both our understanding of Australia's history and our image of ourselves'.

To sum up, Anzac helps make us more ready to fight.

My fifth and final argument for downsizing Anzac is the ideology argument.

Geoffrey Serle years ago coined the term 'Anzackery' to apply to the inflation, by excessive and bombastic commemoration, of a part of our history into a myth.

There are plenty of recent examples, many of them coming from our Prime Ministers – on both sides of politics.

My argument is this: there is a risk that Anzackery will develop into 'Anzacism', a form of state ideology, built on a narrow base, justifying a particular set of policies and punishing dissent.

(And I'm here taking Anzacism a little further than McGirr did when he used the same term.)

Anzacism as a state ideology might have a number of characteristics.

Let me compare these possible characteristics with state ideologies we have known in the past:

1. A linkage with traditional national symbols (thousands of national flags as the main feature of party rallies in totalitarian regimes; national flags as a dominant feature in Anzac Day marches).
2. A requirement for ritual observance (historians of the old Soviet Union refer to the 'reverential' attitude towards Leninism; here, Angus Houston, chair of the then Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, said: 'The Board is determined to ensure that the Anzac Centenary is marked in a way that captures the spirit and reverence it so deserves').
3. Moving mass ceremonies affirming loyalty to the ideology (May Day ceremonies; Dawn Services).
4. Adoration of mythologised ordinary people (Stakhanov, the super-worker; John Simpson Kirkpatrick).
5. Intrusion into fields where ideology is not normally present but where people gather en masse (compare the attitudes of the crowds at the 1936 Berlin Olympics with those at the Anzac Day AFL match or the Anzac Test); and, finally,
6. Loyalty tests (pledging loyalty to a state ideology as a feature of communist regimes; the prominence of Anzac in the citizenship literature of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection).

There is nothing wrong with healthy patriotism but I think there is a problem with a narrowly-based patriotic ideology, a flag-

draped, sentimental, often loud-mouthed Anzacism that is suspicious of, if not downright hostile to alternative – awkward – views.

Yet the freedom to have awkward views is presumably part of the freedom referred to on ‘the King’s Penny’, which was the large medallion received by the families of the men who died in World War I.

(The text on the King’s Penny reads, ‘He died for freedom and honour’.)

The last time I looked, it was not acceptable for people of faith to seek to suppress the views of agnostics and atheists – and vice-versa.

The situation we are now facing is analogous.

The myths and legends of our past must not become the basis of a state ideology.

An Anzac loyalty requirement – or any other pseudo-patriotic stipulation – is just as unacceptable as a fatwa against infidels or an edict against unbelievers.