

Address by Hon PJ Keating
Australian War Memorial
Canberra
11 November 2013

Nine months from now, one hundred years ago, the horror of all ages came together to open the curtain on mankind's greatest century of violence – the twentieth century.

What distinguished the First World War from all wars before it was the massive power of the antagonists.

Modern weaponry, mass conscription and indefatigable valour produced a cauldron of destruction the likes of which the world had never seen.

The statesmen who had set these forces in motion had never assumed that their conflict might be limited only by the scale of their young populations. They failed to understand how developing industrial organisation, railways, science and rising productive capacity rendered almost inexhaustible the ability of each to deliver the death blow and keep on delivering it.

The generals, especially the Allied ones, knew through military training that not since the Napoleonic Wars had frontal attacks been effective – certainly not against the foil of barbed wire fortified by the modern machine gun. Yet, a line of trenches was dug, from the English Channel to the Swiss Alps - a front which denied commanders the opportunity of that classic military manoeuvre - the turning flank and encirclement. This denied, the line was fortified by major cannon and howitzers, while the generals fell back on the only policy left to them - the policy of exhaustion.

And into this deadly crevice they fed their heroic, young obedient populations.

The First World War was a war devoid of any virtue. It arose from the quagmire of European tribalism. A complex interplay of nation state destinies overlaid by notions of cultural superiority peppered with racism.

The First World War not only destroyed European civilisation and the empires at its heart; its aftermath led to a second conflagration, the Second World War, which divided the continent until the end of the century.

But at the end of the century, from the shadows, a new light emerged. Europe turned its back on the nation state to favour a greater European construct. Individual loyalties are now directed from nationalist obsessions toward an amorphous whole and to institutions unlikely to garner a popular base. It is

difficult to imagine these days, young Europeans going into combat for the European Commission, or at a stretch, the European Parliament.

This advent means that European leaders are no longer in a position to ask or demand the sacrifices which once attended their errant foreign policies. A century beyond Armageddon, young men and women are now freed from that kind of tyranny.

The virulent European disease of cultural nationalism and ethnic atavism not only destroyed Europe, it destroyed the equilibrium of the world.

While a century ago Australia was an outreach of European civilisation, here we had set about constructing an image of ourselves, free of the racial hatreds and contempts which characterised European society. Though White Australia institutionalised a policy of bias to Caucasians; within Australia we were moving through the processes of our federation to new ideas of ourselves. Notions of equality and fairness – suffrage for women, a universal living wage, support in old age, a sense of inclusive patriotism.

And our sense of nation brought new resonances; Australian stories, poetry and ideas of our Australian-ness. We even developed a celebratory decorative style in our architecture and named that Federation. We had crystallised a good idea of ourselves and had begun to break free of the dismal legacy of Europe's ethnic stigmatisation and social stratification.

By 1915 we had no need to re-affirm our European heritage at the price of being dragged to a European holocaust. We had escaped that mire, both sociologically and geographically. But out of loyalty to imperial Britain, we returned to Europe's killing fields to decide the status of Germany, a question which should earlier have been settled by foresight and statecraft.

Those bloody battles in Flanders, on the Western Front and at Gallipoli nevertheless distinguished us, demonstrating what we were made of. Our embrace of a new sense of human values and relationships through these events, gave substance to what is now the Anzac tradition. For whatever claims Britain and its empire had on those who served and died on the Western Front and at Gallipoli, the primary claim remained Australia's.

Those Australians fought and died not in defence of some old world notion of competing empires and territorial conquests but for the new world – the one they belonged to and hoped to return to.

This is why Australia was never in need of any redemption at Gallipoli, any more than it was in need of one at Kokoda thirty years later. There was nothing missing in our young nation or our idea of it that required the martial baptism of a European cataclysm to legitimise us.

What the Anzac legend did do, by the bravery and sacrifice of our troops, was reinforce our own cultural notions of independence, mateship and ingenuity. Of resilience and courage in adversity.

We liked the lesson about supposedly ordinary people; we liked finding that they were not ordinary at all. Despite the fact that the military campaigns were shockingly flawed and incompetently executed, those ‘ordinary people’ distinguished themselves by their latent nobility.

The unknown Australian soldier interred in this memorial reminds us of these lessons as much as he reminds us of the more than one hundred thousand Australians lost to us by war.

I regard as a singular honour, the decision by the Council of the War Memorial to permanently display an engraving of the oration I gave as Prime Minister at the funeral service of the unknown Australian soldier on 11 November 1993. And to have some words from that oration inscribed on that hallowed tomb.

My time as Prime Minister spanned the period of the Pacific War, 1941 to 1945, fifty years on. It caused me to visit the sites of our military action from Papua New Guinea through to Thailand. It made me think much and write about the various episodes of conflict, of the bravery and suffering of Australian service men and women during the Second World War.

This context sharpened the memory and essence of the Anzac legend, within which it was decided to inter an unnamed, unknown Australian soldier in the Memorial’s Hall of Memory.

Indeed, the War Memorial’s then Director, Brendon Kelson and his Deputy, Michael McKernan, were instrumental in the process that led to the interment of the soldier.

The words the Memorial enshrines today were written for that occasion.

When Don Watson and I first discussed the writing of it, we both felt the poignancy of the occasion. My uncle, William Keating, had died in 1945 on the death march from Sandakan to Ranau, while Don Watson’s grandfather was twice wounded in Flanders after being infected with Spanish flu. He returned to Australia, never recovering from it.

The history of those two theatres of war had haunted each of our lives in differing yet similar ways.

I thought it important that the speech express with clarity, simple notions of understanding and appreciation that went in personal terms, such that we might have been speaking of a relative who had died in some contemporary calamity. Hence the notion that ‘he’ was all of them yet one of us.

By his interment, I thought it important to say that this unknown Australian soldier would serve his country yet again. That his presence would give us a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian as well as serving to remind us of the sacrifice of the more than one hundred thousand men and women who never came home.

As Prime Minister, I was particularly pleased to bring these episodes of our history, especially the First and Second World Wars, into sharper relief. To remind us that the deeds of our men and women at war give us an opportunity to renew our belief in the country, while renewing our appreciation of their faith, loyalty and sacrifice.

The soul of a nation is the richer for it having been warmed by its stories and traditions. Yet its stories and traditions should not stifle or constrain its growth as it needs to adapt.

I am greatly heartened that so many young Australians find a sense of identity and purpose from the Anzac legend and from those Australian men and women who have fought in wars over the last hundred years. But the true commemoration of their lives, service and sacrifice is to understand that the essence of their motivation was their belief in all we had created here and our responsibility in continuing to improve it.

Homage to these people has to be homage to them and about them and not to some idealised or jingoist reduction of what their lives really meant.

One thing is certain: young Australians, like the young Europeans I mentioned earlier, can no longer be dragooned en masse into military enterprises of the former imperial variety on the whim of so-called statesmen. They are fortunately too wise to the world to be cannon fodder of the kind their young forebears became: young innocents who had little or no choice.

Commemorating these events should make us even more wary of grand ambitions and grand alliances of the kind that fractured Europe and darkened the twentieth century.

In the long shadow of these upheavals, we gather to ponder their meaning and to commemorate the values that shone in their wake: courage under pressure, ingenuity in adversity, bonds of mateship and above all, loyalty to Australia.