

Remembrance Day Address, NSGHS 8 November 2016

Ladies and gentlemen, guests and students,

We are in a season of anniversaries and centenaries. In three days time we shall mark the 98th anniversary of the Armistice of 11 November 1918, which for some marks the end of the vast war known to history as the First World War.

At the outset, we should remember the dimensions of that prolonged catastrophe. 51 months of mechanised killing, industrialized slaughter. The conflict sprawled across the globe.

Today, I am looking out at a richly international audience. Whoever you are, your great grandparents almost certainly were touched, or even crushed, by the conflict, wherever they lived. Because the conflict raged not only in Europe, but also across the oceans of the world, and in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia, in China, and across the Pacific. It was a gigantic imperial war.

Its reach was stunning. For example, havoc was wrought in Africa. There were military casualties, forced labour, starvation, and disease, resulting from the campaigns to capture Germany's colonies. These cost the lives of a million Africans – probably one in twenty of the whole African population.

The war sucked in vast numbers of troops and labourers. Africans, Indians, Asians and Pacific Islanders served in Europe, and beyond Europe. For example, 138,000 Indians fought alongside British forces on the Western Front in 1915. Altogether some four million dark-skinned non-Europeans served in uniform, or laboured, for the European-led armies.

We should be careful, therefore, that our First World War anniversaries are not cheapened and narrowed. They are not occasions for nationalist flag-waving. We are not making a national brag book. Our Australian story must sit in the context of a protracted world catastrophe.

Of course, on this day of remembrance, we remember first the impact on the Australian people. The total of Australian war deaths – counting the 550 suicides and 8,000 war-related deaths in the aftermath of the war – was probably 72,500.

But the global statistics are still more horrific. Estimates of the total number of people killed across the globe vary wildly. There were at least ten million military deaths, and probably a total of 17.8 million people killed. Or, on average, more people were killed *every day* in this war than the 2,750 people killed at the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001.

We should remember that sadly the killing did not end with the Armistice. In Germany, more than 760,000 civilians (mostly the very young and elderly) had already died in the food crisis created by the British-led blockade. This was cruelly worsened by the victors' decision to prolong the blockade after the armistice. The under-fed people of Central Europe were exposed to the influenza pandemic of 1919. Thus, in Germany still more civilian deaths came on top of the two million military deaths. The Versailles 'peace' in Europe was not signed until June 1919.

Far beyond Germany, a wave of civil wars and ethnic killings continued well after 1919, from Finland to Central Europe, and across much of Eastern Europe, and in Russia, Greece, Turkey, and across the Middle East, so that the killing went on for years.

But it is not all a bleak record. There is nobility in the struggle to avert this war, and in the struggle to contain it, and in the struggle to end it – by negotiation.

There are centenary moments in *this* struggle passing us by.

You, young women, have deep international origins (which in truth we all share), and progressive outlooks. And you are helping to shape a new Australia, so different to that vanished old Australian kingdom of 'Empire loyalism'. You can take

some special pride in a number of the big Great War centenaries.

For instance, last year, April 2015 was the centenary of the International Congress of Women at The Hague, April 1915. Women, supporters of female suffrage, from both sides of the war, now joined together on neutral Dutch territory – American, British, German, French, Dutch, Scandinavian women. They urged mediation to end the war by compromise. They urged a peace guaranteed by a new international order, with permanent international structures, a formula that prefigured the League of Nations, and the United Nations.

Last month, another centenary moment rolled by, with little fanfare, a special Australian centenary: 28 October 1916. On that day a national plebiscite of the Australian people rejected the idea of conscription. The liberal idea prevailed: that it is wrong to force a person into uniform to take the lives of others, under pain of military law, when their conscience revolts against this. The English traditions of liberty survived; from *Magna Carta* and *habeas corpus*; that it is wrong to deprive people of their freedom when they have committed no crime; that a pressed man, with a rifle, is no better than a slave.

Congression landed Europe in hell; conscription kept them there.

Next month, December, another centenary moment is approaching – a moment that should be as famous as any battle. 12 December will mark the hundredth anniversary of the German Peace Note, offering to end the war by round-table negotiation. A few days later, 18 December 1916, the American President Woodrow Wilson, issued his Peace Note, urging war aims to be spelled out so that mediation could begin. Leaders on both sides in the war rejected this way out. They preferred to speculate on still more war, in pursuit of a military victory, war-at-any-cost, so that they could impose peace terms on the loser.

But we can be proud that the Australian people, in that first conscription referendum of October 1916, and again in the second conscription referendum of December 1917, rejected this ‘war-at-any-price’ mentality.

It was perhaps the uniquely Australian contribution to the Great War – an unmatched democratic insurgency, against the power of government, propaganda, and newspaper chains.

On Remembrance Day we should reject the alibis that are trotted out to justify this frenzy of killing. We should question the mindless fatalism that insists there was simply no alternative. We should shrink from the sacrificial fantasy of the nation reborn through young blood. We should shun even the consolations of victory – because the end cannot justify all means.

The Tasmanian-born Radical MP, Len Outhwaite, said it best in the British House of Commons in February 1916. He warned that going on and on for a military victory would mean ‘hoisting the flag of victory over an international graveyard.’

Remembrance Day, therefore, is a day to remember the war in the widest sense – the cost of war, its controversies, and the alternatives to war, campaigned for by men and women of principle on every side.

As ever, the alternative to war lies in that long, long struggle, to build a new order, that matches the rule of law in our civil society with the rule of law in international affairs. This must be underpinned by a culture that builds a tenacious faith in the universality of the brotherhood and sisterhood of man – arguably the ideas at the heart of all religions. The alternative to war lies in a culture that genuinely regards war with infinite regret, as marking diplomatic failure, as lamentable, as always and reluctantly the very last resort – not the wellspring of our national character. For if war is the wellspring of our national character, it is a wellspring poisoned by the blood of our own children.

The peace ahead of us demands the strengthening of the international institutions, the structures, and the international law that have been so painfully built up by the brave souls from every land who have come before us.

Douglas Newton