

# War “Commemorations” and Remembrance Day “Celebrations”

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*The officials are called one by one to lay wreaths, a ceremony of mechanical efficiency. With each laying comes the sense of wonder at how this could happen. Political figures are the first to vote in parliaments and side with the executive when it comes to wars. The temptations of human drives to tempt, and then succumb to death, were there long before Sigmund Freud identified them.*

In the Australian capital, there were many wreaths, so many uniformed, deodorised dignitaries distant from the cries of battle and the horror of engineered slaughter. There were the expected, the usual, the normal: the most medalled of them all, the Governor General, the various Chiefs of Army, Navy and Air Force.

There was the Chief Justice of the Australian High Court making her appearance. There was even the ceremonial didgeridoo player. Various associations also featured: those dealing with the incapacitated; the matter of war widows, the issue of legacies. It seemed like a vast who's who of the military complex, which is exactly what it was.

The Australian response here is, in some ways, more tragic than most. Retained, generally white Ghurkhas for imperial causes (there were those of other races in the Australian armed forces at points), they flitted between theatres to be slaughtered at the behest of not-so-grand strategies that mangled the word “freedom” and confused it for politics. In battle, such a word has little meaning, about as significant, in fact, as a wreath. What matters is survival.

Across media networks, the word freedom was uttered as an automatic response, a genetically programmed insistence that the deaths of the Great War had been somehow necessary and, importantly, productive.

That disposition was sown by such figures as King George V, who had issued a request to the people of the British Empire to suspend ordinary activities for two minutes on the hour of the armistice “which stayed the worldwide carnage of the four preceding years and marked the victory of Right and Freedom”.[1]

In 1997, the Australian Governor-General, Sir William Deane, proclaimed that November 11 be deemed Remembrance Day, insisting that a minute's silence be observed at 11 am on November 11 each year, a pause to reflect, more broadly, sacrifices made by the Australian armed forces.

Modern representatives of this view abound, and they are, unsurprisingly, effusive in the veterans' organisations. There were the remarks, for instance, of Richard Embleton from the Geelong Returned and Services League, who reflected on the tens of thousands of wool

poppies laid out before Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance.

"You only have to look around Australia [to see] how free we are and how important it is."

To justify mass murder and death, the word sacrifice has become the indispensable substitute for political folly, the ultimate apologia for the misguided and sanctimonious. Consider the words of Finance Minister, Mathias Cormann's commemorative address.

"In Belgium, around 13,000 Australians paid the ultimate price - it is a price that those who lived there and their descendants have not forgotten in the last 100 years." [2]

For Cormann, being himself Belgian-born, the fallen had particular significance. Australian soldiers had, in effect, come to defend the land of his ancestors.

"In the country of my birth, Australians marched to defend and to die for the land of my family."

But would it be that commemorations were the sombre stuff of true reflection, a genuine appraisal of flaws, errors and disaster. The New South Wales Governor, David Hurley, suggested that current and future generations "interpret through their own lens and their own filter" the legacy of the Great War.

Such lenses and filters have yet to be changed. An example of its ossification, and fixation, is the cult of poppies, an effort of mass indoctrination that has done everything to dissuade modern generations from pondering the errors of their ancestors' ways.

To not wear the unfortunately misused flower invites criticism and crucifixion from the veneration police. When the world football federation FIFA decided to ban the poppy from the shorts of the Scotland and England teams in 2016, ripples of propagandistic hysteria made their way through converts.

"Our football players," claimed British Prime Minister Theresa May with clichéd consistency, "want to recognise and respect those who have given their lives for our safety and security."

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland used the symbol in defiance, and were duly fined.

The reasoning from FIFA was unusually relevant: the poppy was a political symbol, and therefore an inappropriate part of sporting attire. Unfortunately, the organisation went back on its ban this year, a reversal pressed upon them by the UK football authorities.[3]

To that end, each ceremony retains, in its message, the promise of future war, the next murderous gamble and suicidal play of politics and the failings of the opportunistic classes. The ones slaughtered are rarely the ones making the decisions. The ideologue remains desk bound; the bureaucrat stays behind to order things far from the front line.

The Great War, the war to end all wars, is touchingly remembered by some but genuinely ignored in its lessons. It sowed future revolutions, and produced more conflicts, notably the greatest of them all, the Second World War. It saw the destruction of the aristocratic classes – for many, a good thing; and the death of a generation. It brought, to Australia, a melancholic disposition. It introduced, into European life, pessimism and depression even as it uprooted the established social order.

To best remember and commemorate the fallen and those “caught up” – an expression always used in November every year – the resort to needless wars and destructive foreign interventions could be a start. That start, notably among such countries as Australia, has yet to be made. War retains an intoxicating sweetness for those who have never tried it.

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## Notes

[1] <https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/remembrance-day/traditions>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-11/remembrance-day-australia-commemorations/9140974>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/41378397>

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