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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Centenary of Anzac

SPEECH

Thursday, 14 May 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Thursday, 14 May 2015 Page 4103 Questioner Speaker Marles, Richard, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr MARLES (Corio) (12:46): With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, before I just acknowledge Matthew Kinnia, who is a student at Western Heights College in my electorate. He is in parliament this week as part of the Rotary Adventures in Citizenship program. Matthew, it is fantastic to see you here and it is a great pleasure for me to have you in the advisers box.

Anzac Day this year was a genuinely remarkable day. As I attended the predawn service at the Geelong Peace Memorial in Johnstone Park at quarter past four there were literally thousands of Geelong citizens who had been there for some time, waiting to be a part of this first service of this remarkable day. From there many were going to the dawn services that happened in Portarlington, in Lara and in Norlane. And many in my electorate would have gone to the incredible dawn services in the neighbouring electorate of Corangamite—in Torquay and in places like Queenscliff. There were literally thousands—tens of thousands—of people in Geelong who were commemorating this day on a grand scale, and it was wonderful to see.

It raises the question about the meaning of Anzac Day, which I believe has become something much greater now than it was even 20 years ago. We have seen the phenomenon of an increasing number of people participating in Anzac Day events. I think it does behove us to think about what this phenomenon is and the significance of Anzac Day.

It is, of course, the way in which Australia commemorates its 'veterans' day', if you like. It commemorates the service and the sacrifice of those who have served our nation in armed conflict. We have heard so many wonderful speeches in this place and, indeed, around the country about that service. I think that as a way in which we commemorate the service of veterans, that we do this in as dignified and respectful a manner as any nation in the world.

I think it also tells the particular story of the place that World War I has within our nation's history. It was a conflict which, as many have remarked, occurred very early on in our nation's life. From a population of just under five million people it saw 417,000 people enlist for service—156,000 of whom were injured, including my grandfather, and 60,000 of whom lost their lives. For a young nation to experience that kind of sacrifice so early on in its existence placed upon us a firing of the soul that has left an indelible mark which is with us to this day. We can see the traces of that mark when we go to any town or village in this country which has more than 50 or 60 people in it: there is there a monument particularly to those who served and lost their lives in the First World War. Our consciousness and our identity were formed very much within the experiences of that conflict.

This leads then to the other aspect of Anzac Day which very much is about our nation's identity. Former General David Hurley, a former chief of our Defence Force, remarked in Martin Place in Sydney on Anzac Day that those Anzacs who participated in the First World War—their deeds during that time—did much more to forge our national identity than did the acts around the time of federation. I think that is a very acute observation and that it is absolutely true. The way in which Australians behaved and performed in those adverse circumstances was the first time that we had presented ourselves to the world as Australians and we did so in a way which demonstrated such great honour. It demonstrated resilience and it demonstrated a camaraderie which was remarked upon by all those who looked upon the way in which Australians engaged in their work—camaraderie by officers and privates. There was an egalitarianism in the way in which we did what we did. We were tough; those Anzacs were remarkably tough.

This element comes through in so many of the histories around the First World War—a sense of humour in the face of adversity. I think all of those characteristics are what we all think it is to be an Australian—that is what it means to be one of us, and it is why this day is so important for us. In many respects, for me, I think it is now our national day. It really is the day on which we celebrate what it is to be an Australian, as bearing those characteristics which were first put on display to the world by those remarkable Anzacs. Identity matters and, in understanding our identity, knowing our history matters.

I particularly want to tell the story of one of the Centenary of Anzac grants which I was able to participate in, which was in respect of the township of Lara in the north of my electorate. In Lara there were just over 100 people who enlisted in the First World War; 24 of them died. It was a very high casualty rate compared to the overall casualty rate. Very soon after that, in 1918, one of the very first avenues of honour to be planted anywhere in Australia. It was a circle of sugar gums around the main oval at the Lara football ground. Research was done by the Lara RSL—Bruce Challoner did fantastic work to discover this history—and a monument was paid for out of the Centenary of Anzac grants, and it now tells the story of five of the remaining sugar gums. They were part of the first avenue of honour within our region and one of the first within our country. In doing that, a piece of local history has been reclaimed. We can remember the fact that those trees were planted by people who did not know those 24 soldiers simply as names on a roll but knew them as their brothers, sons and husbands. The people who planted those trees knew them personally and they cared, and those trees a hundred years from now will be remembered for the reason they were planted. I think that is a wonderful thing. In telling that story, I really want to commend the Centenary of Anzac grants because it allowed us to do similar monuments within my electorate, as all members will have in theirs. For me, it was with the Geelong football club in St Leonards. For our children looking forward it was at schools like St John's Lutheran School and North Shore Primary School. Both have put memorials in their schools so that kids coming through will know, through their history, their identity so that they know the community to which they have been born and they understand that they are a part of something which is bigger than themselves.

Finally, for me, my personal identity and my story is imbedded in the context of Gallipoli and Lieutenant Leo Pearce. He was my great uncle who landed on Gallipoli at 8 am on 25 April 1915, within four hours of the very first landings. He was a stretcher bearer who went on to win a distinguished conduct medal on the Western Front, and his brother, my grandfather, served on the Western Front as well and was awarded a military cross. The two of them at a point in time met on the Western Front. Leo was in Gallipoli on the original Anzac day. On the same day, the grandfather of my dearest friend John Hamdi Eren, the current Victorian Minister for Sport and the member for Lara—which is a seat that sits at a state level within my seat of Corio—was there but in the forces of Mustafa Kemal, fighting to defend his homeland. If they could have spoken to each other on that day—they were within the vicinity of each other—and could have known that two generations down the track their descendants would be the best of friends and colleagues representing the Labor Party in different parliaments in this country, what an extraordinary conversation that would have been. It says so much about the special relationship which exists between Australian and Turkey, born out of conflict and, in that sense, a relationship which I think is unlike any other between two countries in the world. It says a lot to me about the significance of this particular conflict, the significance of that relationship and the significance of Gallipoli and the First World War to our nation's history and about who we are. In that, I absolutely want to add my words to say lest we forget.