

# Five arguments for downsizing Anzac

David Stephens

Senator Michael Ronaldson, the Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, [says](#) that the forthcoming centenary will be the most important period of commemoration in our history. I beg to differ.

I want to present five arguments why we should make Anzac less important than it is now and as it looks like becoming in the next four years. I am not talking about Anzac *Day* (provided it is done with dignity) 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 is the vainglory argument. “Vainglory” means “excessive elation or pride in one’s achievements”. Another definition is “boastful vanity”.

Quite simply, the way we commemorate and celebrate the military parts of our history is boastful and way out of proportion to the impact of our arms on most of the conflicts in which we have been involved. Of course, there are particular battles and campaigns where a case can be made that Australian forces were decisive – Beersheba 1917, France in the summer of 1918, El Alamein 1942, for example – but generally we have been bit-part players in overseas wars. In the Gallipoli campaign, birthplace of the Anzac legend, Australians made up just 6 per cent of the forces involved on both sides and 5 per cent of the casualties on both sides.

Our war commemoration is boastful also – boastful and insensitive – because it takes very little account of the broader human impact of war. Raw statistics are not, of course, the only way of supporting this argument (and every soldier killed in war is a tragedy) but how do the 100 000 or so Australian war deaths in the twentieth century compare with total deaths in wars around the world in that century?

We are measuring here not only military deaths but civilian deaths as well. Almost all Australia’s war dead were volunteers serving in uniform beyond our shores; in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, however, they tend to have wars in their own backyards which means 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 around 0.04 per cent of the total.

We are not just Australians but citizens of the world. 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. Wars are not just noisy and colourful highlights in a single nation’s history. They are not just occasions for commemorative exercises wrapped in patriotism and clouded with nostalgia. They kill people, lots of them, and they injure and traumatise lots more. We need to focus more sharply on what war does to people – the world’s people – than on what Australian people do in war.

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, wide-eyed children and, now, sound and light shows. 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. We do military history so well in Australia, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Australian War Memorial and the various state memorials, through school curricula, through the endless flood of military history books, good, bad and indifferent, through military tourism for all ages, through movies and mini-series during the Great War centenary, through commercial hucksters flogging everything from Gallipoli champagne cruises [entertained by Bert Newton](#) or hosted by [a retired General](#) to a [Gallipoli memorial swag](#), as well as lots and lots of commemoration, anniversaries of this battle and that, new memorials being built with government money, travelling exhibitions, re-enactments, performance art, symphonies, and so on, 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 there is so much more to our history that we could be researching, presenting, popularising, and celebrating. We are a much more interesting country than we will seem if that khaki thread strangles all of the others.

Australian history is made by women, men, individuals, families, artists, philosophers, scientists, unionists, business people, public servants, soldiers and politicians. We carry the imprint of the First Australians, the builders of the CSIRO, the Sydney Opera House and the Snowy scheme, the pioneers of the bush frontier in the nineteenth century and the urban frontier in the 1950s, and "boat people", whether they are convicts, post-war "ten pound Poms" and "New Australians" or asylum seekers. 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 today. Michael McGirr, [writing in 2001](#), 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.

I believe the tendencies McGirr described more than a decade ago have increased since.

My fourth argument is the bellicosity argument. "Bellicosity" means "an inclination to fight or quarrel"; it is sometimes rendered as "bellicoseness".

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 too much analysis of why we are doing it. We don't worry too much about whether and how fighting serves our national interest. Australians are altruistic warriors. Here is Prime Minister Abbott early in March [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.

We say we are not militaristic. But the prime minister's remarks suggest you don't need to be militaristic to be inclined to fight.

Added to all this, says Professor White, 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. (Think about all those military history books, all those commemorations of battles.) Professor White believes that part of the explanation for our failure to go into the purpose and cost of war is "the potent idea of war in Australian society, focused on the Anzac legend". He writes about "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".

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 noisy myth. There are plenty of recent examples, many of them coming from our prime ministers on both sides of politics

I believe 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:

- 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.
- 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".
- Moving mass ceremonies affirming loyalty to the ideology: May Day ceremonies; Dawn Services.
- Adoration of mythologised ordinary people: [Stakhanov](#), the super-worker; John Simpson Kirkpatrick.
- 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.

- 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 views.

This may be an awkward attitude to have in the Anzac centenary years. 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 medallion reads, “He died for freedom and honour”.

The last time I looked, it was not OK for children who believed in myths like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny to lay into children who did not – and vice-versa. Nor was it 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. For example, a Coalition MP [recently accused](#) the ABC of lacking “situational awareness” for rebroadcasting in the centenary year of the outbreak of the Great War a segment which included questioning of the Anzac legend.

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

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*David Stephens is secretary of Honest History ([honesthistory.net.au](http://honesthistory.net.au)). Honest History is a broad coalition of historians and others, committed to frank debate and expressing a diversity of opinions on specific issues. Views in this article are the author's own.*