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National Submission on the Anzac Centenary

Australian Historical Association

The National Commission is seeking ideas and suggestions from all Australians about how to commemorate the Anzac Centenary in 2015.

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) representing historians from all fields of history throughout Australia welcomes this call for public submissions concerning the commemoration and exploration of this important historic event.

We are pleased to note, in particular, that one of the National Commission's aims is to seek suggestions as to how we can 'explore the legacy of the First World War for Australians and what this means for the future'. We address the complexity of the legacy below.

The AHA notes that the guidelines state further that:

"Submissions may include ideas, principles and/or recommendations for an individual commemorative project or broader commemorative program' and that identified themes include 'education' and 'international relations and cooperation'. The AHA wishes to address these themes in particular.

Our submission advocates professional principles that we think should govern the administration of the commemorative historical program and suggests a broad and balanced approach to addressing the legacy of the First World War in Australia.

General principles

We recommend that any funded program of historical research be required to:

- contribute to the production of new historical knowledge of different aspects of the Australian experience of war.
- employ professional methods of historical enquiry;
- be rigorous in distinguishing historical fact from mythology;
- pay due attention to international as well as national contexts in understanding the causes and effects of Australian engagement in war;
- acknowledge the costs as well as the positive outcomes of the war.

The legacy of the First World War

The legacies of the First World War are multiple and varied: cultural, demographic, economic, emotional, medical, political, psychic and social. They are still felt in many domains of national life: the re-configuration of health, quarantine and social welfare services, new patterns in employment and gender relations, a new sense of national identity.

In national politics, the war gave rise to soldier settlement, the birth of the RSL and the Country party, the split in the Labor party, a new conservative party, intensified sectarianism, the new salience of the British empire to Australian identity; and in the international domain, a new spirit of internationalism, the founding of new international organisations, such as the League of Nations and the ILO and new international peace and disarmament movements.

The costs of the war were vast, in terms of human lives lost and otherwise destroyed, the debilitating effects of illness and grief, profound disillusionment with western civilization, and the huge burden of debt.

We recommend that funding programs encourage the historical examination of the full range of these legacies. For example, Australian engagement in war has long given rise to anti-war movements and peace organisations, from the Boer war to the the First World War through to Vietnam and Iraq. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was founded in 1915 and thus also celebrates its centenary in 2015, making it the longest lived women's peace organisation in the world.

The AHA believes that any balanced understanding of the Australian experience of war should support enquiry and research into all aspects of that experience and help to locate that experience in an international framework.

Two specific recommendations.

1. We recommend that the Australian Historical Association, as the peak-body for historians in Australia, be appropriately represented on the organisations and committees entrusted with the oversight of the funding of national historical and educational programs, to provide appropriate professional input ;
2. We recommend that the Australian Historical Association, which organises annual history conferences across Australia, in both capital centres and regional centres, be funded to organise an international conference in 2015, charged with exploring the full range of the legacies of the First World War, in Australia, in an international context.

Professor Marilyn Lake,

President,

Australian Historical Association