

The last Anzac's bullshit detector

Michael Mullins | 19 April 2015

In recent years I have judged the exuberance of the Anzac commemoration against the nonchalant attitude of the last Anzac Alec Campbell (pictured), who was **quoted** in the *New York Times* at the time of his death in 2002 at the age of 103:

I joined for adventure. There was not a great feeling of defending the Empire. I lived through it, somehow. I enjoyed some of it. I am not a philosopher. Gallipoli was Gallipoli.

In other words, it's what you make of it. *Whatever!*

Alec Campbell didn't make much of it. John Howard did, possibly because he saw it as helping to bond the nation in the wake of 9-11 and Tampa. Paul Keating **didn't**. He saw it as part of Howard's 'populist manipulation of Australia's best interests'. For Keating, Kokoda was more significant.

Entrepreneurs have been even more lyrical about our failure at Gallipoli, with Alan Bond **calling** the 1983 America's Cup win 'the greatest Australian victory since Gallipoli'. Such mis-statements have helped to build an emotional resonance in young Australians that has allowed Anzac Day to supplant Australia Day as the national day in the popular imagination.

To be fair to John Howard, he did **acknowledge** that Anzac, as we know it, is something that was made up. Or at least had little to do with the experience of the troops in 1915, whether they were stoic-in-adversity, or happy-go-lucky like Alec Campbell. Howard said in 2005: 'The original Anzacs could not have known at the time that their service would leave all Australians with another enduring legacy - our sense of self'. Arguably he was admitting that Alec Campbell's quest for nothing more than adventure was appropriated for an entirely different (conservative ideological) purpose.

In context, the *New York Times*' Campbell **obituary** had a slightly bemused tone in its explanation of Anzac: 'Gallipoli has been defined by writers and politicians in Australia and elsewhere as the moment that

defined the national identity and character, even though it ended in withdrawal rather than victory.'

If it comes down to selecting an event or series of events that are worthy of commemoration because they define the nation, we need to pay more attention to historians than politicians.

Historians including the former Principal Historian at the Australian War Memorial Dr Peter Stanley argue that the **frontier wars between black and white Australians during the first century of European settlement have more to say about the Australian nation than the Gallipoli landing.**

Politicians shun talk of this because they paint a picture of white Australians as violent and racist rather than heroic and virtuous. Stanley is now the president of the non-profit **association** Honest History, where his colleague David Stephens uses the term *Anzackery* to encompass the destructive and even abusive effects of the jingoism associated with Anzac Day. Stephens **argues** that 'much Anzackery targets children, to the extent that their psychic health is at risk from a sentimental, misleading portrayal of war'.

As Anzac Day comes around every year, politicians and other promoters of Anzackery cite what are supposed to be our national characteristics, including mateship, courage, loyalty and fairness. In this context you do not hear mention of that other renowned identifier of the Australian character the bullshit detector. Something Alec Campbell appears not to have lacked.

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Submitted comments

In the introduction to his 2013 book "Forgotten war" Henry Reynolds writes "Aboriginals who fought fought for the white man are remembered with reverence. The many more who fought against him are forgotten". The purpose of his book is his belief that "it will be unconscionable to indulge in a crescendo of commemoration (100th anniversary of WW1) and ignore the fundamental importance of the war between settlers and Indigenous nations within Australia....This is the war that made the nation

not the fateful invasion of Turkey at the direction of the Imperial Government."

Thank you Michael for your timely contribution to the conversation helping to redress the historical record.

I am informed that this conversation will continue at a conference later this year at which Henry Reynolds will be the Keynote speaker entitled "Both ends of the Gun. Australian Aboriginals at War"

Jim Carty 20 April 2015