




Speech by
Bill Byrne

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Tuesday, 13 November 2012

REMEMBRANCE DAY

 **Mr BYRNE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (11.41 pm): Last Sunday I attended a Remembrance Day ceremony in my electorate, and I am sure other members did as well. It is appropriate in the immediate aftermath of Sunday's Remembrance Day to reflect on the strong emotions felt by many Australians on that day. This is particularly poignant at a time when 1,500 Australians are serving in Afghanistan. These service personnel are representing us with distinction in a conflict that has always carried a very poor prognosis. But the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 1918 represents the full stop at the end of Australia's most bloody war experience.

The statistics of the First World War, and Australia's participation, are simply shocking. We should remember that in 1914, the population of Australia was less than five million. Somewhere approaching 400,000 Australians enlisted in the first AIF, and that represented approximately 38 per cent of the male population between the ages of 18 and 44. When we consider that there was a much greater percentage of 18- to 25-year-olds than 35- to 44-year-olds, we quickly realise that a huge proportion of the healthy men from an entire generation served in the AIF. Of those, nearly 60,000 were killed, in excess of 150,000 were wounded, and approximately 85,000 suffered serious illness as non-battle casualties.

Over time, these numbers tend to lose traction in people's minds. Extrapolated to today's circumstances, those numbers would translate to approximately two million Australians volunteering, with somewhere approaching 300,000 dead. I mentioned the 1,500 ADF deployed in Afghanistan. How long do you think Australians would tolerate our participation in a war that meant that that entire force, or its equivalent, was wiped out every week, week after week, for four years?

Billy Hughes, the Prime Minister of Australia at that time, pointed out that no nation paid a higher price in blood than Australia. At 65 per cent, the Australian casualty rate as a proportion of embarkations was the highest of any combatant nation during the war. What makes it even more astounding is that Australia was the only major combatant nation to maintain an all volunteer force throughout the war. This is why all thinking Australians stop to remember the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 1918. This is why every whistlestop, every hamlet and small town in Australia has some form of memorial to the First World War. It is because not one Australian family was untouched by the horror of that war.

It is with this knowledge that I found it quite insensitive and ill considered that some months ago this government chose to close down the Community Memorials Restoration Program. For very modest amounts indeed, community groups were able to gain government assistance to use towards the maintenance and restoration of cultural and historical artefacts. I encourage all members of this government, without further politicising the present disagreement, to reinstitute that program as a matter of some urgency.