



## *Canberra Conversations*

### **Remembering war — seeking peace**

#### **A Canberra Conversation for Anzac Day 2014**

*Manning Clark House, Forrest  
Wednesday 15 April, 6.00 – 9.00 pm  
Hosted by A Chorus of Women  
25 participants (list attached)*

### **Introduction**

Canberra Conversations provide an opportunity for Canberra citizens to talk about important issues in a collaborative environment that provides an alternative to the adversarial debate that we usually see in politics, the media and other public discourse. The conversations are based on the principles of dialogue; however, they are not about getting everyone to agree. We have discovered that many disagreements reflect different ‘framing’ so that both parties can be ‘right’ within their own frame, which is revealed through careful listening.

We include story and song in our conversations to allow the emotional and ethical aspects of a topic to be voiced. These human qualities are of central importance but are not easily brought to the fore in public forums. Our songs are written by members of A Chorus of Women.

In this summary report, we have included the key points of view and lines of discussion expressed by participants, and conclude with comments on the conversation process itself, as well as ideas for keeping this Anzac conversation going.

### **The topic**

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1915 Gallipoli landings is fast approaching and the Australian Government is planning large-scale commemorations to mark this event. This is on top of the already increasing participation in Anzac Day events each year. However, while maintaining the deepest respect for service people who lost their lives in war, there is growing concern in some parts of the community about the intense focus given to the Gallipoli campaign, and to war in general. There is less focus on the wider suffering and trauma caused by war to others in the community, including the loss and suffering of Indigenous Australians through the Frontier Wars. In addition, keeping the focus on past wars also prevents us from starting a national

conversation about finding ways to a sustainable peace. Participants at A Chorus of Women's Centenary Canberra Conversation, 'Our Canberra', in July 2013, which was attended by over 70 people,<sup>1</sup> revealed a strong theme among those present that the city is to some extent defined as a city of war memorials and we should seek ways to commemorate and encourage peacemaking ('peace memorials').

In this Anzac conversation we therefore tasked: As we approach the centenary of Anzac Day, and move into the next 100 year period since that ill-fated campaign, can we move the primary focus of our commemorations from remembering our war dead towards actively seeking peace?

To explore this further, we posed three questions:

- How can we best respect the memory of those who have been killed or traumatised by war?
- How can we best respect the memory of loss and trauma suffered by Aboriginal people during Australian settlement?
- How could the Anzac story help Australia to contribute to a just and sustainable international peace?

Chorus: Great love. Greater love has no man than this  
 That a man lay down his life for his friends  
 And the highest love of life beyond this  
 Let us lay down our arms  
 In peace, in peace, in peace without end  
*Words and music by Honey Nelson, A Chorus of Women*

## **The participants**

This was a smaller, more intimate event than our previous Canberra Conversations. Participants comprised eight members of A Chorus of Women and 16 others, representing a cross-section of Canberra people, including a member of the Executive Committee of the ACT Branch of the RSL, a member of the former Anzac Centenary Advisory Council, a member of the newly formed group Honest History, members of Manning Clark House, a Walpiri elder, the organiser and other participants in the annual Canberra lantern-lit Anzac Eve Peace Vigil, and other concerned citizens.

## **The conversation**

### **Information sharing**

An informal introductory conversation brought out information from different perspectives in the room. We heard that during the Vietnam War period the ANZAC tradition nearly collapsed but there was a resurgence in the 1980s and this renewed interest has gained increased momentum over the past 10 years.

Some saw the focus on the military campaigns as supporting the needs of successive governments to send troops to war. In this view, invoking the ANZAC spirit and honouring of the dead through ritual and ceremony prepares young people to go to war and society to accept our involvement in wars. Not everyone shared this view (see below).

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<sup>1</sup> See the Chorus of Women website/Events/[Canberra Conversations](#)

The Anzac Day Dawn Service at the Australian War Memorial (which is a local event organised by the ACT Branch of the RSL) has increased from about 4000 people some 25 years ago to 25,000 last year; with over 35,000 expected this year, making the organisation more difficult and the event less personally meaningful for some RSL members. The increase in attendance may coincide with Australians becoming more nationalistic (particularly since the America's Cup win in the mid-1980s). The 10.00 am march is also organised by the ACT RSL branch (although the national ceremony following the march is organised by the AWM). The march is for veterans but some are not happy that children and grandchildren of veterans can wear medals and march. A powerful thought was shared, and agreed, viz: it would be a good thing if in time the number of veterans marching faded away because that would mean that Australia had not been involved in any more wars.

It was also noted by veterans and others that Gallipoli has become a tourist location with many tourists attending the 25 April Dawn Service at Gallipoli. Other commercial aspects of the Anzac commemorations were also noted, such as the sale of ANZAC Commemorative wine for (advertised in the AWM newsletter). Some see this as part and parcel of a free country; others as an indication that the deeper significance of Anzac is getting lost.

Several participants (including A Chorus of Women) have been involved in an Anzac Eve Peace Vigil (now in its fourth year), which is a Canberra, local community event. It starts at sunset at the top of Mt Ainslie with a welcome to country. Walkers descend the mountain with lanterns and meet other participants at the base of the mountain. All continue into the parade ground of the Australian War Memorial for a moving ceremony. This event, which is not in any way opposed to Anzac Day or disrespectful to service people who have died, was started to create a beautiful and inclusive ceremony for lamenting all victims of war and opening new community dialogue about peace.

We also heard that during the past few years, some historians have started to speak out about aspects of our history that are not included in the prevailing Anzac stories. The term 'Anzacary' has been used by some to denote the ever increasing focus on Anzac Day as the defining story for Australia ('the birth of the nation'). A new organisation, Honest History, is working to document broader social, cultural and environmental impacts of war, and to publicise aspects of Australia's history of war and conflict that are not usually mentioned, including the Frontier Wars with Aborigines. Other historians are less sure there is a problem or that the government is using Anzac as a means to an end. Is the government pushing for this event, or is it responding to the community's need to honour their lost soldiers? Similarly, while some think Anzac day glorifies war, others feel the opposite — that it reminds us of the horror of war and the need to avoid conflicts in future. This highlighted tensions in the public discourse, which were reflected among our participants.

Chorus: Lest we forget, Lest we forget  
*'Lest We Forget'; music by Glenda Cloughley*

## Small group conversations

### *How can we best respect the memory of those who have been killed or traumatised by war?*

Themes:

- **Dignified commemoration and lament.** Make the commemorations dignified (not touristic); solemnly remember, lament and support service men and women.
- **Acknowledge the trauma.** Be inclusive and sensitive towards those traumatised by war (who are often not able to talk about their experiences); direct more research dollars to post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **Make peace.** Direct more research towards peace (eg set up an Anzac Peace Research Centre).
- **Educate.** Ensure that education curricula cover all aspects of Australia's history (not just a military one).
- **Love our country.** Value what we have — and also empathise with other people's love of country.
- **Choose not to go to war.** Unlike the world before WW1, we now have the United Nations to help to resolve conflicts. We can choose not to go to war (imagine Australia as a neutral country); and treat war as a failure of civilisation, not as inevitable.

As noted above, there was tension around the reasons for Australia's involvement in wars in other countries, which have been different for different wars (eg WW1 very different to WW2) and complex (post-WW1); there was also some cynicism about the 'mighty' dollar and the significance of this in influencing public opinion. However, there was common ground around the importance of education that fairly represents these complex issues, as well as careful listening to other views to resolve differences at all levels.

### *How can we best respect the memory of loss and trauma suffered by Aboriginal people during Australian settlement?*

Themes:

- **Frontier wars.** Academia has been slow to acknowledge that the settlement of Australia involved a war with the original inhabitants. But there is now a much clearer understanding among historians that it was a savage conflict — a war where Indigenous people died defending their homes and families from an aggressor. It is taking the general population longer to acknowledge this and we need education to help us catch up.
- **Anzac Day parade.** Do the Frontier wars fit with Anzac Day? There are different views on this. A contingent of Indigenous and other people have joined the Anzac parade for the past three years to acknowledge the Frontier Wars. Film footage of this action shows clapping and cheering from the crowd, and apparent acceptance of the marchers, but the group are not permitted to enter the War Memorial Forecourt for the commemoration service and are blocked by police at the top of Anzac Parade. Some asked, what would it take to allow them to pass? What

would it take to lay a wreath to acknowledge Indigenous loss of life in the Frontier Wars? This question was unresolved.

- **Aboriginal service people.** Anzac Day is about the people who have served overseas. Aboriginal people have served in our armed forces since the beginning. Many were proud not to be specifically acknowledged because they did not consider themselves to be different. They were treated equally while in the armed forces but on their return they were not citizens, not able to vote (until 1967) and suffered other discrimination.
- **Australian War Memorial.** The AWM has statutory limits because its governing legislation does not include the Frontier Wars. Some have suggested that this should change and that the War Memorial should commemorate the Frontier Wars and the National Museum should deal with the Indigenous history more generally. Others think we should have a separate discreet memorial to the Frontier Wars. We need to find out what Aboriginal people want.
- **Listen, speak, exchange.** We need to properly listen and empathise with Aboriginal people to make sense of what is needed and how to live together in one home. This will take considerable effort and reaching out across cultural boundaries. We were joined in this part of the conversation by a Walpiri elder who is an artist and academic researcher supported by Manning Clark House. He shared some of his cultural knowledge with us. In Walpiri culture, Kangaroo represents the continent, Emu represents the sky, and the Wedge Tail Eagle connects the two; to exist in the homeland of the Kangaroo, you must understand the Emu and soar like an Eagle. This open-hearted sharing of wisdom stories was very moving to many present. Most white (non-Indigenous) people do not know any Aboriginal people.
- **Healing.** Some thought that acknowledging the Frontier Wars could bring great healing; every massacre site and every grave could be marked and respected, as we do for battle sites and graves of those killed overseas. Then we would know how to walk respectfully on this land.
- **Reconciliation.** The settlement of Australia deeply wounded, and in many places destroyed, the oldest and most delicate cultures on earth. Other countries have gone through reconciliation processes. For a just and sustainable future, Australians need to find ways to make peace with Australia's original owners.

Chorus: Open the doors of the chambers (of your heart)

Open your minds to our song

We sing for peace

Through the power of love

Hear the wisdom of women, hear our song

*Lament, words by Glenda Cloughley and music by Judith Clingan*

## A Passion for Peace

After the group discussions, Glenda Cloughley described a major project A Chorus of Women is preparing for April 2015 called 'A Passion for Peace'. The project commemorates the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an International Peace Congress attended by 1500 women from warring and neutral nations at The Hague from 28 April –1 May 1915. The far-reaching resolutions from the congress informed the founding of the League of Nations and later the United Nations. See <http://www.chorusofwomen.org/>

## Plenary ‘circle’ dialogue

We finished with a circle dialogue session to address the final question and bring the threads of the conversation together.

### *How could the Anzac story help Australia to contribute to a just and sustainable international peace?*

We talked further about the tensions in the public discourse around whether going to war has always been about ‘fighting other people’s wars’. Some did not agree with this and thought that each war had been different — some wars could be justified and others not. Others felt that from Vietnam onwards, in particular, the wars have been more political. These differences and tensions were acknowledged but not resolved.

There was also some tension around why we have Anzac Day at all and what use the Anzac marches and increasing number of war memorials serve. The lack of ‘closure’ for families and comrades of the fallen service people who were buried overseas was acknowledged as a motivating force for these activities.

Different explanations were offered for the present mass popularity of the Anzac commemorations, which ranged from mystery (‘we have been doing the same thing for 25 years and more people keep coming’) to cynicism (‘the mighty dollar’ related to government and corporate funded militarism). On more common ground, however, most agreed that the Anzac story embodies timeless qualities of good citizenship — like the 10 Commandments and the Scout Law — universal values (such as love your neighbour, help other people) that show us how to lead good lives. This might explain the mystery of why the Dawn Service is growing so much — in a secular and increasingly consumerist society, there is a counter search for meaning and value (the sacred) in life. The Anzac story combines ancestral authenticity and belonging with a secular experience of the sacred.

The ludicrousness of what happened at Gallipoli and in Europe also stands as a lesson. Some have suggested that the leaders of the nations involved in WW1 should apologise on behalf of their forebears for having allowed the war to happen: ‘We wish we hadn’t done it.’ This might be a powerful start to creating a just and sustainable peace.

Chorus: May you never be hungry  
 May you never be thirsty  
 I wish you health  
 And a happy home  
 My companion  
 May peace be with you  
*Chorus from ‘A Recipe for Peace’, words and music by Glenda Cloughley*

## Reflections on the conversation process

### Contributions from those present

An ongoing challenge for Canberra Conversations is to hear from as many people as possible in the room. The smaller and more intimate format of this conversation made this easier.

## **Tension and disagreement**

Our conversations are not intended to avoid conflict, but rather allow the space for differences to co-exist. What is 'logical' or 'obvious' depends on the frame of analysis and interpretation and we'd like to provide opportunities to allow such differences. Indeed, some of the richest insights for participants and Chorus alike have come from moments of tension and difference within Canberra Conversations.

## **Continuing the conversation**

We know that our event was only the tip of an iceberg of a much bigger conversation and that there was more collective wisdom in the room than was expressed and explored in just one evening. We would therefore like the conversation to continue. The following directions seemed to provide promising seeds for continuing the conversation:

1. Although there were different perspectives on the reasons for going to war, there was common ground on the need to avoid war and build sustainable peace in future.
2. The different perspectives about the value of Anzac Day commemorations and the present mass popularity of these events, were balanced by an understanding that, in an increasingly secular and consumer society, there is a counter search for meaning and value in life.
3. While not everyone agreed that the Frontier Wars should be included in Anzac Day commemorations, there was common ground that the damage caused to Indigenous people by the massacres and dispossession during white settlement left deep wounds and suffering and there is a need for lamentation and healing.
4. The presence of peace activists, academics, Anzac Day organisers and government decision makers in the conversation showed the possibility of dialogue among these groups who might otherwise be assumed to be opposed.

We have received a number of further comments by email since the conversation and welcome more.

Please send your ongoing comments to:

[janetsalisbury25@gmail.com](mailto:janetsalisbury25@gmail.com)

And watch this space for information about our next 'Canberra Conversation' and other Chorus events: <http://www.chorusofwomen.org/whatsnew.htm>

## Participants

Janet Salisbury (Facilitator)	A Chorus of Women
Andrew Glickson	Climate scientist, ANU
Astrid Mednis	Friend of Chorus
Boni Maywald	Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Peace Knits
David Horner	Professor of Australian Defence History, ANU; member of the former Anzac Centenary Advisory Board
David Stephens	Honest History
Fay D’Elmaine	Chorus
Geoff Lazarus	Manning Clark House member, environmental lobbyist
Glenda Cloughley	Chorus
Graeme Dunstan	Lantern maker, event organiser, peace activist, initiator of the Anzac Eve Peace Vigil
Honey Nelson	Chorus
Jan Paulga	Vice President, ACT RSL
Johanna McBride	Chorus
John Harris	Environmental scientist, University of Canberra; author of several books on social change and collective learning
Jono Crane	Alliance Australis
Meg Rigby	Chorus
Meryl Jenkins	Chorus
Pauline Mager	Manning Clark House member
Peter Maywald	Conflict resolution consultant, policy adviser
Sarah Stitt	Chorus
Sebastian Clark	President, Manning Clark House
Sue Hoffmann	Chorus
Val Brown	Emeritus Professor; Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU; author of several books on solving complex problems, collective learning and transformational change
Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu	Walpiri elder, artist, researcher