

Paul Keating's Remembrance Day address: Nationalist myth-making to glorify World War I

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The Remembrance Day speech on November 11 by Paul Keating, Labor Party prime minister from 1991 to 1996, provides a foretaste of the historical falsifications that will be used to promote commemorations of the 100th anniversary of World War One next year.

The Australian government is organising elaborate ceremonies, starting on August 4, 2014—one hundred years after Britain, and therefore its Australian dominion, declared war on Germany. At least \$108 million in public funds, as well as tens of millions of dollars from state and local governments and corporate and private donations, will be spent on marking virtually every event that involved Australian military forces in the four-year so-called “Great War.”

April 25, 2015, the centenary of the landing of Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (ANZAC) troops at Gallipoli in Turkey, their first major battle, will be the occasion for unprecedented nation-wide and international commemorations. Other services are being organised in 2016, 2017 and 2018 to celebrate battles in France, Belgium and the Middle East, where Australian soldiers also fought and died in appalling numbers.

The openly stated intention of the events, spelt out by the former Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the “Anzac Centenary Advisory Board” established by it in 2011, is to promote “national unity” and patriotic pride, especially among youth. The slogan of the official logo is “100 Years of Anzac: the Spirit Lives.”

The plans, however, are fraught with political dangers. The questions that will be asked, particularly by the tens of thousands of school students dragooned into participating, is what exactly is being commemorated, and why? World War One is condemned in widely-available novels, poems, songs, and the accounts of countless participants, as a futile slaughter, fought by a generation of youth deluded by patriotic lies.

Paul Keating's Remembrance Day speech was an attempt to explain away any concerns, falsify the causes of the war and justify the glorification of Australia's participation.

Noting the approach of the anniversary of World War One, Keating asserted that this “was a war devoid of any virtue.” It arose, he declared, “from the quagmire of European tribalism—a complex interplay of nation-state destinies overlaid by notions of cultural superiority peppered by racism.”

By blaming the war on the misguided ideological “notions” of European statesmen, Keating portrayed it as, essentially, a tragic mistake, something that could have been avoided if political leaders had been more enlightened and populations less naïve. He went on to assure his audience that such “nationalist obsessions” had now been overcome by the development of the European Union and could never again cause a catastrophe like 1914. Moreover, young Australians today, he said, were “too wise to the world to be cannon fodder.”

In reality, it was not ideology that caused the war, but economic and strategic conflicts, between the most powerful capitalist nation-states, over who was going to dominate global resources, markets and sources of profit. More than 16 million lives were lost, including those of 62,000 Australians, in what Leon Trotsky succinctly characterised as “the most colossal breakdown of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions.”

The truth that Keating and the organisers of the war commemorations are determined to suppress is the Marxist understanding that World War One was an *imperialist* war, arising out of the contradictions of the capitalist system, fought on *all sides* for the profit interests of the capitalist class.

As the carnage dragged on, the slogans of the Marxist opponents of nationalism and war, “workers of the world unite” and the “real enemy is at home,” intersected with growing opposition among workers of all countries. The antiwar ferment erupted to the surface first in Russia in 1917 and under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, the Russian working class carried out the first socialist revolution in history in October 1917, overthrowing capitalism and establishing a workers' state.

The Soviet government led by Lenin and Trotsky called for socialist revolution in every country as the only means to end the war, which, they made clear, was caused by the capitalist profit system itself and the national-state divisions on which it was based. The ruling elites moved to end the war on November 11, 1918 out of fear of the rapid spread of socialist internationalism throughout the world working class.

Over the following years, the defeats and betrayals of the revolutionary struggles of the working class enabled capitalism to survive, despite the unprecedented catastrophe it had inflicted on humanity. But the objective contradictions that gave rise to the war had not been resolved, and they erupted once again with the

outbreak of World War Two just over 20 years later.

Today, the peoples of the world are once again coming face to face with the danger of imperialist war. The economic breakdown that began in 2008 has vastly intensified the bitter antagonisms between the United States, now a declining world power, and its major rivals in Europe, Russia and above all, China, over control of markets, resources and profits. For more than two decades, US imperialism has used military violence in an effort to retain its global supremacy and is now actively preparing for war against China. Just as it aligned itself with Britain in 1914, the world hegemon of the time, so Australian imperialism is unconditionally backing the US, behind the backs of the population, as it attempts to encircle China.

Elsewhere, Keating has spoken publicly of his concerns that Washington's determination to contain China could trigger major conflict. Having obscured the causes and downplayed the dangers of war, however, he proceeded to rewrite history in his November 11 speech, seeking to fashion the kind of nationalist propaganda that will increasingly be developed to delude young people into supporting the Australian ruling elite as it toboggans towards disaster.

In 1914, Australia, he declared, was a country "free of the racial hatreds and contempts which characterised European society ... Those bloody battles in Flanders, on the Western Front and at Gallipoli nevertheless distinguished us, demonstrating what we were made of. Our embrace of a new sense of human values and relationships through these events gave substance to what is now the Anzac tradition."

"Australians," he insisted, did not fight in World War One for "some old world notion of competing empires and territorial conquests but for the new world ... What the Anzac legend did do, by the bravery and sacrifice of our troops, was reinforce our own cultural notions of independence, mateship and ingenuity, of resilience and courage in adversity ... those 'ordinary people' [Australian soldiers] distinguished themselves by their latent nobility."

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This is historical claptrap.

In 1914, the new federated Australian state was part of the British Empire, maintained the racist "White Australia" immigration policy and denied citizenship to the indigenous Aboriginal population. Australian soldiers were sent by the governments of Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes to fight to preserve the global position of British imperialism and, in return, secure territorial conquests and other advantages for the Australian financial and corporate establishment. In some of the very first actions of the war, Australian and New Zealand forces seized German colonies in New Guinea and the South Pacific.

The pro-war establishment invented the "Anzac" legend as a stunned Australian population received word of the thousands of casualties created in just the first few weeks of the suicidal Gallipoli campaign. The legend was shamelessly used to pressure tens of thousands more youth to enlist as cannon fodder for the even bloodier battles on the Western Front in Europe.

Far from "uniting the nation," the war raised to a fever pitch the

immense class divisions within Australian society. The slaughter at Gallipoli and on the Western Front galvanised opposition in the working class towards the war, expressed in overwhelming votes in 1916 and 1917 to reject referendums giving the government the power to conscript males for military service. Mass strikes and political demonstrations took place throughout 1917 and 1918 against demands that workers and youth "sacrifice" for the war effort. Growing numbers gravitated towards Marxism and internationalism, especially in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

In the past, Keating has criticised the promotion of Anzac mythology precisely because it is so easily exposed as rubbish. In 1992, as prime minister, he kissed the ground on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea as part of his efforts to shift the patriotic emphasis away from Gallipoli to the less well-known Australian military engagements in the Pacific during World War Two. In 2008, he criticised the holding of Anzac Day services in Turkey because "none of it" [Gallipoli] was "in defence of Australia."

With the 100th anniversary looming, however, he concluded his November 11 speech by insisting that Australian involvement in World War One, as well as all subsequent wars, should be celebrated to "commemorate the values that shone in their wake ... above all, loyalty to Australia."

The promotion of such crude nationalist conceptions coincides with the breakdown, once again, of the capitalist profit system, staggering social inequality, rising class antagonisms and preparations for war. Everywhere, the ruling classes are terrified of the outbreak of mass social upheavals and are seeking to intimidate and suppress all opposition through an unprecedented assault on democratic rights, and by promoting the poison of nationalism and chauvinism.

Workers and young people must draw the real lessons from World War One. The nation state system so extolled by Keating is moribund and leading humanity once again into a global catastrophe—this time a nuclear one. Far from being "loyal" to the national state in which they live, workers in Australia, the US, China and every other country must base themselves on the understanding that the only way to stop war is by unifying with their class brothers and sisters around the globe to overthrow the capitalist nation-state system and establish world socialism—a world free of war, poverty and inequality.



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