War Memorials Forum public meeting

March 23, 2011.
Albert Hall, Canberra

Speech by Dr Sue Wareham, ACT Coordinator, Medical Association for Prevention of War

The things a nation chooses to honour with its public memorials, especially those in the most prominent and beautiful places, says a lot about how that nation sees itself, how it wants others to see it, and what it regards as the most important and valuable parts of its history.

Warfare is of course a part of Australia’s history, and it is highly appropriate that the lives of those who have died in war are commemorated and retain a permanent place in our national memory. For this purpose we have the Australian War Memorial, whose Roll of Honour lists all Australians who died fighting in all wars in which we have been involved since the Sudan, with the exception of those killed in armed conflict between Aboriginal and white Australians. There are some gaps in our commemoration of war’s impact, and they include Australia’s frontier wars, and the impact of the wars in which Australia has been involved on civilians, but there is no gap in relation to the world wars. To claim that those service people who died in the world wars have not been adequately commemorated is simply not true.

But while warfare has a place in our history, so too do very many other things, and our commemoration of warfare risks becoming disproportionate, if it is not already, overshadowing all the contributions to human wellbeing that Australia has made in other spheres of life. Canberra has approximately three dozen war memorials, in ANZAC Parade and elsewhere. The existence of such a large and possibly increasing number raises the troubling question as to how many war memorials is enough before we risk militarism becoming a defining factor in our national identity.

What would it say about us, as a nation, if the view from our national parliament towards Mt Ainslie contained not one but three significant monuments to Australia’s involvement in war? What would it say to our parliamentarians, to visitors to our country and our city, and, importantly, to generations of Australian schoolchildren who take in that view? Will it say to our young people that going to war is the most important thing that Australia has done, and perhaps something they also should aspire to?

I want to pose two questions that should be foremost in our minds as we consider the proposal for new memorials, especially those of the grandeur, dominance and scale that are proposed. The questions are: How would our war dead most wish to be remembered, if they had any say in it? And what would our diggers think of the behind-closed doors decision-making that has led to the proposal getting as far as it has?

I’m going to read from the speech given by Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, when he opened the Australian War Memorial on Armistice Day in 1941.

In referring to the Great War, he said that the memorial would be . . .
“...not only a record of the splendid achievements of the men that fought and fell in the war..”
but that it would also be

"a reminder to future generations of the barbarity, of the utter futility of modern war. “

Lord Gowrie asked:

“What can we do for those who did so much? What can we give to those who gave us all? And I know that our answer will be that we are determined that these men shall not have died in vain, and that we are prepared for any sacrifice to put an end, once and for all, to this diabolical menace to mankind and ensure the peace of the world for future generations.”

Lord Gowrie anticipated how future visitors would respond to the galleries and the commemorative areas. He said “Every one of them I am firmly convinced will declare, and will declare with no uncertain voice, never again, never again.”

Unlike the Australian War Memorial, the proposal before us symbolises grandeur, conquest and dominance. It would help perpetuate the diabolical menace of war to which Gowrie referred. Nothing could be less appropriate as a mark of respect for our war dead.