

MAPW Forum 8 March 2015

- Melissa Parkes
- Federal member for Fremantle
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- Good afternoon everyone and happy International Women's Day!
- I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we gather here on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people and we pay our respects to elders past and present.
- I'd like to thank the Perth Male Voice Choir for the beautiful singing, Carolyn for her fascinating insights into the history and meaning of ANZAC, the executive of MAPW for organizing and hosting this event, and the City of Fremantle for providing us with this magnificent venue. It's great to see former WA Premier Peter Dowding here, whose father the Reverend Keith Dowding, a former soldier himself, was a prominent anti-war activist who even participated as a 92 year old in the anti-Iraq war protests in 2003.
- I also want to acknowledge all of you for coming out on a sunny Sunday afternoon to this forum on what is an important and timely topic.
- I always remember, whenever I come to the Town Hall and I pass the statue of my predecessor, John Curtin, the struggles he had over the issue of conscription – a practice he vehemently opposed during World War I, but re-introduced with some limitations when he was Prime Minister in World War II.
- Friends, as we approach the 100th anniversary of the first landing at Gallipoli, and therefore move through a period in which the Centenary of ANZAC will be commemorated – it is incredibly important that in the course of remembering and paying respect to those who suffered in World War I we do not romanticise war, and we do not valorize the often senseless suffering of people in war, which sadly remains a prominent and widespread feature of human life across the planet.

- It is also important that we learn the lessons of war – that prevention is far better than trying to pick up the pieces afterwards, as so well encapsulated in the name of our hosts, the Medical Association for the Prevention of War.
- My task, this afternoon, is to look forward – and try to see a path ahead to a world in which war and armed conflict are a less common feature of our life together.
- We all know that in 2003 the Howard government, like the UK and US governments, chose to wage a war in Iraq without the sanction of the United Nations, and on the basis of a lie about ‘weapons of mass destruction’ that didn’t exist.
- It seems we learned nothing from that disaster because last year the government – with the support of the Opposition - committed Australia to join a US-led coalition to conduct air strikes against IS in Iraq.
- We heard recently that late last year the Prime Minister, virtually of his own accord, proposed sending a stand-alone Australian force to Iraq in what he presumably conceived of as a grand military adventure.
- In Parliament last week the Prime Minister announced that Australia will commit further personnel on the ground in Iraq to provide training to the Iraqi army, even though when Australia’s air-support involvement was previously announced, we were assured there wouldn’t be this kind of ‘mission creep’ and despite the fact that 10 years and billions of dollars have already been spent trying to train the Iraqi army.
- And while we continue to see far too many examples of what might be regarded as conventional violent conflict, I also want to make comment about the extent to which war is finding new ways to do its bloody work.
- I am sure many of you share my dismay at the increased use of drones as an instrument of war – and what is particularly worrying is the almost complete absence of transparency, accountability or public debate on their use.
- I’d like to quote from an article from late last year in the New Yorker about the drone war in Pakistan, titled ‘The Unblinking Stare’:

In a 2012 report that was based on nine months of data analysis and field interviews, a team of law students from New York University and Stanford concluded that the

dominant narrative in the US about the use of drones in Pakistan – “a surgically precise and effective tool that makes the US safer by enabling ‘targeted killing’ of terrorists, with minimal downsides or collateral impacts” – is false. The researchers found that that CIA-operated drones were nowhere near as discriminating towards noncombatants as the agency’s leaders have claimed, with hundreds of civilians killed.

This kind of out-of-sight, out-of-mind remote-control warfare is being prosecuted by our chief military ally without any clear public debate in the US or here in Australia on its legality or consequences. Indeed, two Australian citizens were killed in a US drone strike in Yemen in Nov 2013. Human Rights Watch reported that Australia’s Pine Gap facility may have been used to locate and track suspects for US drone strikes.

- In all of this, we may ask: where is the international rule of law? Death sentences are pronounced and carried out from drones controlled by people we cannot know, who are not accountable to any legal process we would recognise, and whose decisions we are being asked to accept on trust after the fact. And in the case of strikes in Yemen for stance, they are occurring in a country with which we are not at war and which is relatively far from any area where our military forces are engaged.
- In the past Australia has at times been quite an effective advocate against the use of certain weapons or technologies – including land mines – and yet there isn’t a wide comprehension of or protest about how drones are operating; of the basic principles of international law they infringe; and of the terrible outcomes they’ve produced.
- So, I think we all need to be conscious that in terms of political culture and process, and in terms of military technology and protocol, and in terms of international law, there have been some bleak developments.
- But in the name of looking forward, which is my challenge for today, I do want to speak briefly about some areas of endeavour that I believe hold out the real prospect of positive change.

1. The first is **multilateral cooperation**.

- This year we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter and the coming into being of the United Nations with its primary objective of “saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which has brought untold sorrow to mankind.”
- It was a matter of deep disappointment to me that Australia’s commitment to the US-led coalition in Iraq last year occurred without Australia ever raising the matter with the UN Security Council of which we were a member at the time.
- The government needs to recognize that there is no security without collective security, and that collective security itself needs a shared commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict.
- In this I am reminded of Prime Minister John Curtin's last major parliamentary speech on 28 February 1945, in which he championed the new international peacemaking organisation which would become the United Nations. He said:

If we are to concert with other peoples of goodwill in order to have a better world, there must be some pooling of sovereignty, some association of this country with other countries, and some agreement which, when made, should be kept.

... ..

There is a price that the world must pay for peace; there is a price that it must pay for collective security. I shall not attempt to specify the price, but it does mean less nationalism, less selfishness, less race ambition. Does it not mean also, some consideration for others and a willingness to share with them a world which is, after all, good enough to give to each of us a place in it, if only all of us will observe reason and goodwill toward one another?

- History shows, and all our recent experiences confirm, that without a shared approach and a shared commitment to building a lasting peace, conflicts simply tend to morph from one set of antipathies to another, from one geographical venue to another.
- Yesterday’s ally-by-proxy often becomes tomorrow’s enemy; and all those so-called solutions that have involved arming one group to balance the violence of another

inevitably prolong the violence and inevitably see the weapons turned against those who supplied them in the first place.

- We are watching that in Iraq and Syria, just as we have watched it in Afghanistan.
- I strongly support the idea of Australia establishing a mediation unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This would be modelled on the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs mediation unit, which provides good offices and mediation to other states to help prevent conflict, thereby reducing the potential need for peacekeeping forces, reconstruction and emergency aid, and development efforts that inevitably follow an outbreak of conflict. Australia could play an effective role as a regional leader in mediation and conflict prevention.
- It would constitute a further means by which Australia can work with and through multilateral and regional partners and processes.

2. Another means of preventing and resolving conflict is to **empower women**.

We know that in World War I approximately 41 per cent of the war dead were civilians, while in contemporary conflicts 90 per cent of the victims are civilians, most of whom are women and children. War affects everyone – women and men, boys and girls. Yet everyone experiences conflict differently – history has shown that women and girls are particularly affected by sexual and gender-based violence in wartime.

- Rape is commonly used as a weapon of war against women and children - it goes on today in places like DRC. It is said to be more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in the Congo. In Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, an estimated 400,000 rapes took place. Rape was the rule rather than the exception and 70% of rape survivors were infected with HIV/AIDS.
- But Rwandan women are pulling the country up out of the darkness. Rwanda now has the highest proportion of women in parliament in the world, even beating Sweden.

- Every female member of the Rwandan parliament – regardless of political party or ethnicity - is a member of Rwanda’s Forum of Women Parliamentarians. After extensive public consultation with civil society this cross-party women’s forum has put forward legislation providing for the first comprehensive legal framework on gender-based violence in Rwanda’s history. You’d think that if Rwandan women Hutus and Tutsis can put aside their country’s recent genocidal history to work together we in the Australian plmt could find a way of getting past our political differences for the common good!
 - On a day such as IWD it is important to acknowledge that women can overcome historic barriers and can help build stronger, healthier communities. Women are not only victims in times of armed conflict, but they play a crucial role in efforts to resolve conflict and to rebuild the economic, political, and social fabric of societies torn apart by conflict.
 - UN Security Council resolution 1325 that was first adopted in 2000 and has since been built upon stresses the importance of women’s equal and full participation as active agents in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace-building and peacekeeping. In 2012 the former Australian government adopted a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, which outlined Australia’s framework to integrate gender considerations in all peace, aid and security efforts. This is a cause Australia can and should continue to champion.
3. The third area I want to mention goes to the question of Australian government decision-making, and, specifically, the question of parliamentary oversight when it comes to war. This is generally referred to as the **need for a *War Powers Act***.
- In my first speech to parliament over 7 years ago I talked about the need to dramatically improve the way Australia and the Australian government considers its military involvement.

- I believe it is very odd that a decision by an Australian government to change policy, even minutely in some cases, requires the passage of legislation through the parliament, yet the decision to commit the nation to war, to send our armed forces to put their lives on the line and to be prepared to take lives remains within the sole discretion of the Prime Minister and the cabinet, without any requisite involvement of the parliament. This is done through the exercise of prerogative powers by convention rather than pursuant to the Australian Constitution, which is silent on the matter.
- In 2006, the UK House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution issued a report entitled *Waging war: parliament's role and responsibility*, which concluded:
... the exercise of the Royal prerogative by the Government to deploy armed force overseas is outdated and should not be allowed to continue as the basis for legitimate war-making in our 21st century democracy. Parliament's ability to challenge the executive must be protected and strengthened. There is a need to set out more precisely the extent of the Government's deployment powers, and the role Parliament can and should play in their exercise.
- The UK has subsequently incorporated parliamentary approval into their deployment of troops overseas.
- In my view, Australia should adopt a *War Powers Act* that would require parliamentary approval of any deployment of Australian defence personnel overseas (except in situations of emergencies or UN peacekeeping deployments). This is needed more than ever given Australia's new engagements overseas that will only increase the terrorism threat to Australians both here and abroad, which as we have seen, then leads to the call for more national security measures that reduce our civil liberties and rights even further in a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle.

Foreign Aid/International Development

- 4. The fourth area I want to discuss is foreign aid or international development assistance. I would like to quote from my first speech to parliament:
- "With regard to global terrorism, there can be no justification for the pursuit of political objectives through an accumulation of shattered bodies and destroyed lives; yet our response to such acts of violence must be resolutely long term and proactive, rather than last-minute

and reactive. As noted by former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, you cannot fight a war on terror without also fighting a war on disadvantage, discrimination and despair. Security, development and human rights are inextricably linked. Tackling poverty in our region through the Millennium Development Goals is part of a wider strategy to deal with terrorism, climate change, pandemics and refugees.”

- When nations like Australia, with the capacity to help address the disadvantage that affects too many of our fellow human beings, when we actually provide that assistance, we are not only making a difference to their basic quality of life, we are also working to reduce the likelihood of violent conflict between and within countries.
- I was incredibly humbled and honoured to be for a brief time the Minister for International Development in the Labor government, and I was pleased that even through difficult economic circumstances, we raised Australia’s contribution to foreign aid to its highest level in a quarter of a century.
- The clear purpose of the program under Labor was to save lives and reduce poverty, but of course we knew that our aid program also had the effect of building economic capacity and good government, and increasing national and regional peace and security.
- And the point I want to emphasise today is the point I made in every speaking opportunity as Minister – namely that dollar-for-dollar, international development assistance is far more effective than military expenditure. Sadly, we now have a government that has savaged our foreign aid Budget, reducing it to a level not seen for 40 years – at the same time as it goes recklessly into unexamined and unjustified military ventures.
- I note that while the approved budget for UN Peacekeeping in 2014- 2015 is **\$7 billion**, this is less than half of one per cent of world military expenditures (estimated at \$1.8 trillion).

Community engagement and action

- 5. The last topic I want to talk about is the question of community engagement and action in relation to war and conflict involving violence.
- This comes back, to some degree, to what I said earlier about remote warfare including the use of drones – but is also relevant in terms of Australia’s involvement in Iraq.
- Sadly, there is not a strong understanding among Australians of the scale and severity of armed conflict in other parts of the world, nor of Australia’s role.
- We need to try to inspire a new generation of Australians who are prepared to seriously question the orthodoxies around war and military involvement and spending.
- This was really brought home to me a few weeks ago when I spoke in condolence for Tom Uren, a key member of the Whitlam government and without question a great Australian.
- Tom of course was an anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigner almost without peer in the 1970s – and his opposition to war was grounded in his own experience as a soldier, a prisoner of war on the Thai-Burma Railway, and as a prisoner in Japan who witnessed the glow of the atomic destruction of Nagasaki.
- Tom Uren was an anti-war campaigner at a time when such an attitude brought serious consequences. People often forget that he was twice jailed for his participation in anti-Vietnam War rallies – and this occurred when he was a Member of Federal Parliament.
- There is not enough serious questioning of military commitments and spending by the wider community, nor by the political class. In fact we seem to have a dangerous and I would say blind consensus around the necessity of substantial military expenditure, and a matching lack of will to tackle the waste and inefficiency in defence budgets.
- There is enormous scope for more discussion, more questions, more protests in the cause of peace, which of course requires the strongest commitment to the prevention of war.
- The fact is we need more of this – of gatherings like this one; of people like you.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, let me thank you all for being here for this important discussion.