



PRIME MINISTER

12 April 2007

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF A GIFT TO THE NATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES, CANBERRA**

EO&E.....

Well thank you very much Mr Director. Mr Perry, Ambassadors, High Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen. Today we launch, or I launch at the request of the Archives this remarkable treasure trove of Australian history. When I had the honour of launching Les Carlyon’s epic about the Great War towards the end of last year he made the remark that I think was profoundly the case that World War I was the greatest tragedy to befall this country. And the most astonishing thing to me, and I believe to many Australians of my and younger generations was the extraordinary commitment in sheer proportionate terms of this nation to World War I. We had a male population, and bearing in mind then it was only men who fought, we had a male population of probably two and a half to three million and 376,000 people volunteered and that was just an astonishing thing. But it’s also an occasion like this a reminder that that sacrifice was not Australians alone. It is appropriate that the High Commissioners who lost, what, 753,000 dead in World War I, Canada more than 100,000 and I think today marks the, or very close to it, the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in France which was so much the defining moment for Canada in World War I as, in a sense, Gallipoli had been for Australia and New Zealand.

World War I not only drained this nation of so many young lives and in that sense alone represented a colossal human tragedy, but it also had a profound effect on the subsequent history of our country. It was indeed World War I when for the first time Australians and Americans have fought together. Coincidentally enough on the 4th of July in the Battle of Harmel, under the command whose tactics resulted in a victory in a very short period of time. And he brought to that particular battle a rare combination of tactical skill and the use of airpower.

And of course, all of the events of World War I threw a very long shadow over Europe and over the world and sewed the seeds of the second great catastrophe of the 20th Century and eerily proved correct that prediction made by Ferdinand Foch as the war ended and he looked at the Treaty of Versailles. He said “This is not a peace

treaty, it is an armistice for 20 years.” And it was probably one of the most prophetic statements made by somebody about the subsequent history of the World in the 20th Century.

I do thank Roland Perry for being here. I have, along with I’m sure many thousands of Australians have read his wonderful biography of John Monash, which is a superb work, and the growing store of what can only be called epic Australian histories now of that period; of Mr Perry’s, of Mr Carlyon’s adding to the historical analysis of World War I which has come from many distinguished British and American authors.

That is what I wanted to say about World War I. Can I just say something about the epic achievement of the Archives in putting together the personal records of 367,000 Australians. It must have taken years to do that and what it does is to unlock to all of us, access to these wonderful individual stories. And there are great Australian stories, and the more prominent of those of course are people like Monash and Jacka and then of course the terrible thought of tragic family stories of four, five and six brother in the same family all over a period of years losing their lives in the battles of both Gallipoli, but more heavily in France and Belgium where some 45,000 Australians died.

But the achievement of the Archives is quite remarkable and living history is a cliché, but its nonetheless true that if you see a document it tells you a story. And I was shown by Mr Gibbs on the way in the Barton Constitution, draft Constitution of 1891 which is in the entrance and shows his handwriting lovingly altering; striking out colonies and putting in the people of Australia. And for somebody who is occasionally accused on nationalism or centralism, can I say I thought it was a very good and prescient striking out because the authority for everything we do in this country in my view does derive from the people of Australia and not from instrumentalities or from governments.

But I do want to congratulate the archives. This is a wonderful thing for the nation and it will bring extraordinary pleasure and pride to families all around the country. To be able to access on your website these records of your relatives, of your friends, or the friends of your relatives, or the relatives of your friends will be a great experience and this is just such a valuable contribution to our country.

We need to know more about our history. Things like this help more than you can imagine in bringing about an understanding of Australia. Its quite interesting how the scale of Australia’s commitment in World War I is now perhaps better understood than it was a generation ago and I think that’s a wonderful thing because it was an extraordinary commitment at an extraordinary time and it has left an indelible character imprint that has stayed with us and will stay with us forever.

And in that vein, I am delighted to be here today and to launch this archive and to thank the Archives of Australia for their wonderful contribution. Thank you.

[ends]