

ANZAC CONVERSATIONS (4): Citizen Voices for Peace

*Note: The project **Anzac Conversations: Lessons Learned** was initiated by QPLC and supported by a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2015. This is a report arising from the fourth event held as part of the project.*

The Event

On Sunday 8 November 2015, between 2 and 4pm, at the Friends Meeting House, Turner ACT, about 30 people (Quakers and others) attended this public meeting, on the theme 'Citizen Voices for Peace'. David Purnell from QPLC chaired the event, and the speakers each presented their perspectives and then responded to questions and comments from the participants. Audio-visual material enhanced the session. There were also displays of material from the Quaker WW1 Exhibition and the series of posters prepared for WILPF's 100th anniversary.

The Speakers

David Stephens, Honest History Coalition

David spoke about the 'acquisition of influence' by the arms industry and that Australia is the world's sixth largest importer of arms, especially heavy purchases. This history of engagement with the weapons industry has influenced Australians' memory of war and normalised the concept that war is a usual, if not necessary part of humanity. The impact of this normalisation is particularly potent on children who are influenced by education programs which include phrases such as the 'hero soldier'. This normalization has imprinted to the point that war is seen by some people as inevitable and the only way Australians will be safe. Airport advertising by arms manufacturers reinforces this.

David also spoke about how the real nature of war isn't reported on. Rather, commemoration ceremonies are patriotic with references to heroism and people fighting for our freedom. The War Memorial gives naming rights to some of its areas and programs to arms suppliers, and uses elements of a 'fun park' to engage children. The more previous wars are sanitized or sentimentalized, the easier it is to promote and sanctify current or potential conflicts. Similarly, sentimentalizing war makes it harder to objectively ask questions about why we go to war.

David also drew connections between the focus on 'heroes' and blood sacrifice, and the similarities to how some children are groomed by pedophiles.

Diana Abdel-Rahman, Canberra Multicultural Community Forum

Diana spoke about the way governments always have to

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have 'the other' which they often turn into the enemy or one to be feared. This includes both large overt actions and more subtle characterisations (such the evil Russian in films during the Cold War). Now the enemy is Islam and Muslims as well as refugees.

Modern technology shows that things aren't so black and white. Despite widespread protest, the West initiated the Iraq war in 2003 that led to the power vacuum responsible for the rise of ISIL. Satellite technology could have been used to destroy the ISIL leadership. Instead the West has allowed the infestation of the region by ISIL which has increased fear/hatred of Muslims which also supports the goals of the West. The West allowed Palmyra to be destroyed to make ISIL and Muslims in general an even bigger enemy.

Ronis Chapman, Love Makes a Way

Ronis did a power-point presentation of the national day of action undertaken by *Love Makes A Way* groups across Australia. Love Makes a Way is not an organization but is a collection of individuals from faith based groups who come together to speak out about the government's current policies on the detention of asylum seekers. Groups staged peaceful sit-ins in the offices of federal Parliamentarians Human Rights Day, 10 December 2014, protesting about the detention of children under current asylum policies. Ronis was arrested in the event in Canberra, but charges were not laid.

All who participate in LMAW actions are required to participate in nonviolent direct action training. Inspiration and lessons come from other nonviolent activists around the world – both current and past. Ronis said that not only was the action itself important, but telling others about the action is another way to give voice to the refugees.

Jonathan Curtis, United Nations Association of Australia (ACT Branch)

Jonathan spoke about war as part of human nature. When countries are on 'war footing' minorities become enemies, dissenters are shut down, resources are directed to war preparation, civil rights are jeopardized and propaganda is used to increase public support.

The role of the United Nations is to manage this Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde character of the modern state. The UN's work is based on international law and the Declaration of Human Rights, the drafting of which was guided by the distilled wisdom of many faith traditions. The UN has a major role in helping us set norms for behavior and in response to challenges like climate change, pandemics, refugees, famine – all of which can generate conflict.

Unlike other international organisations, the UN has every country in the room, discussing the same topics, especially in the General Assembly. The role of the UNAA is to raise awareness of the UN's role and the relationship between the UN and the government. It is important that Australia is now fully engaging with the UN.

Margaret Bearlin, WILPF

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom has a long history of peace activism. Margaret reminded us that the resolutions passed at the International Congress of Women in 1915, which founded WILPF, laid the basis for the League of

Nations and the United Nations. The Congress's resolutions included: resolving conflict by negotiation in a council of nations, universal disarmament, the establishment of permanent international courts, to remove foreign bases, and centrally, women and men to have equal rights and representation. Margaret attended the 2015 Centenary Conference in The Hague with 1000 women and men from 80 countries: the theme was *Women's Power to Stop War*. She shared some of the significant statements made by people from many different countries, and the emergence of a strong commitment to the abolition of war.

WILPF works to end the causes of war through local, national and international resolutions. In particular, WILPF has played a significant role in the development, adoption and implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women Peace and Security', which recognizes the crucial role women play in preventing and resolving conflict and peace building, and affirms women's equal right to participate in all peace processes. A series of posters has been prepared to show the story of WILPF in Australia. WILPF will be involved in the peace convergence at Pine Gap in October 2016.

Karl-Erik Paasonen, 350.org

350.org is an international network of groups that seeks to reduce carbon emissions to below 350 parts per million (the 'safe' level). Its analysis shows that 'business as usual' will be calamitous for millions of people, and it aims to remove the 'social licence' – the public support that enables energy companies to attract investment. Its approach is to apply targeted popular pressure on those businesses /councils/organisations which invest in fossil fuels to divest; and to use non-violent civil disobedience where necessary. The recent decision by the ACT government to divest from fossil fuel investment is one successful outcome of a campaign by trade unions and community groups. Following a campaign organized by 350.org, the Commonwealth Bank announced it would not underwrite the Galilee Basin coal project in Queensland.

There are moves by the authorities to restrict the capacity to protest, and this makes it important to develop new strategies. Nonviolent action includes negotiation, electoral work, or direct action. A bigger difference is made by larger number of groups, such as mass strikes. It will become more costly to protest for change over the next five years and could cost people their jobs, if not their lives.

Sue Wareham, Medical Association for Prevention of War

Some notes prepared by Sue (who was unable to attend) were read at the meeting. The points covered were (a) the importance of more resources being put into mediation and diplomacy, (b) the need for a greater range of non-military responses to crises and conflicts, (c) the adverse impact of cuts in foreign aid upon the capacity to build peace through meeting people's basic needs (especially in Africa), (d) the international campaign to abolish nuclear weapons, (e) the need for war powers reform so that Parliament has the final say in whether Australia becomes involved in war, and (f) the action by a Canberra group to remove arms trade advertising from Canberra Airport.

Discussion

During the discussion, several themes emerged:

- The normalization of war assisted by the military's access to schools.
- The need to do peace education in schools to counter the increasing presence of subtle military messages.
- The danger of words like 'border security' becoming an ongoing feature of government policy.
- The importance of reclaiming the peace agenda by speaking out, and by building bridges across difference.
- The value of recognizing those aspects of our own lives that are unpeaceful and contain the seeds of violence.
- The need to stand firm against American bases in Australia.
- There are lots of hopeful signs and new organisations springing up to reclaim democracy, and the positive role of women.

Material collected during the series of four public meetings during the year will be put together in an appropriate form of publication for wider use.

Canberra

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Relevant Websites

www.honesthistory.net.au

www.350.org

www.wilpf.org.au

www.unaa.org.au

www.icanw.org.au

www.mapw.org.au

www.facebook.com/LoveMakesAWayforAsylumSeekers

www.quakers.org.au/QuakersinAction