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Keating's pointscoring unfair to Menzies and a disservice to history

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM December 15, 2017

Paul Keating's attack on Robert Menzies is merely the latest episode in the politicisation of Australian history. Lost in that attack, which seeks to portray Menzies as an appeaser who would have left Australia undefended in World War II, is even the slightest pretence of historical accuracy.

As Allan Martin, a distinguished historian who was anything but a reactionary, showed two decades ago, the reality is that Menzies, like the vast majority of Australians, was deeply affected by the trauma of World War I. The scars — visible in the disfigurement of so many returned soldiers — were still fresh, and the fact Menzies' two older brothers had both been casualties of the war made him painfully aware of its horrors. As the world veered towards another bloody conflict, the countless lives that would be lost weighed heavily on his mind.

Nor was he alone in that respect. Seen from today's perspective, it is hard to grasp the dread the looming threat of war inspired in a generation that had vowed "never again". After a bloodbath that cost more Australian lives than all subsequent wars combined, the descent into another half-decade of even more terrifying warfare seemed unthinkable.

Moreover, although the rights and wrongs of the situation look straightforward in retrospect, it was not unreasonable at the time to believe that the Treaty of Versailles had left central Europe a dysfunctional mess, and that Germany's grievances could not be entirely dismissed.

It was largely in that spirit that Australians from both sides of politics cheered British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's acceptance in Munich in September 1938 of Hitler's hollow promise to halt German expansionism; and it was largely in that spirit that both sides of politics sought to ensure that whatever could be done to avoid another war was done.

But it was not just the human toll that weighed on the Lyons and Menzies governments. They well understood the risks Australia faced from Japan should war break out. In a remarkably lucid analysis written immediately before Chamberlain's trip to Munich, the Department of External Affairs, as it then was, warned that were Germany "permitted to continue her present career of violence unchecked, the day of reckoning will only be deferred".

However, even deferral would be preferable to an immediate conflict, because in the event of war "the British navy would necessarily be concentrated in the North Sea and the Mediterranean", with the result that "no adequate naval forces would be available for the defence of Australia".

Yet acceptance of Munich scarcely meant the conservative governments were led by defeatists who refused to prepare for war, as Keating claims. On the contrary, a rearmament program was under way long before hostilities began. From 1931 to 1938, defence spending quadrupled in inflation-adjusted terms — a rate of growth exceeding that in the UK and in the other British dominions — with the Menzies government then increasing it 20-fold over the period to 1941.

At the same time, many other measures were adopted, including a sweeping reorganisation of the defence establishment that effectively vacated all non-clerical positions and allowed for their replacement on the basis of talent. To ensure a reliable supply of armaments, experienced industrialists were brought in to build and run weapons plants. As GE Caiden put it in his classic history of Australian public administration, although the Menzies government was criticised for its "apparent hesitancy", its unprecedented decisions were "the first step (that) paved the way for resolute action".

Those decisions received only mixed support from the ALP. As late as 1939, Labor attempted to secure legislation that would have prevented conscripts from being sent to Papua and New Guinea, leaving those islands entirely open to Japanese invasion. And even after Germany had invaded Poland, Labor leader John Curtin, hoping for a speedy settlement, called for peace negotiations.

In contrast, as Martin showed, Menzies, despite the private anxieties he shared solely with his closest friends, consistently maintained that Australia's prime objective was to win the war.

None of that is meant to belittle Curtin, who was an entirely admirable man and a great prime minister. But, like Menzies, he led a deeply divided party, with many of Labor's most active members echoing the initial Soviet line that the conflict was just another "imperialist war". And hatred of Britain remained intense in Labor's Irish strongholds, leaving a legacy still apparent today.

All that may seem so remote as to scarcely be worth writing about. But with Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, beginning this week, and Christians preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we should bear in mind the Old Testament's single most frequent injunction: remember.

If the verb *zakhar* — remember — appears in the Hebrew Bible no less than 169 times, it is because Deuteronomy's unconditional command to “ask now of the days past, which were before thee”, and the Talmudic instruction to do so “all the days of thy life”, underpin the collective memory that is indispensable to a sense of community. And just as Proverbs tells us that “divers weights are an abomination unto the Lord”, so a false accounting of history destroys that complex of beliefs and memories that give a people its identity and purpose. Robbed of its past, such a people cannot have a common present or a shared future.

It is that which is so profoundly objectionable in the shredding of Australian history. The degradation of what little collective memory this country retains in the interests of political pointscoring can only diminish our already tattered ability to live together. That Keating, who has made such a contribution to Australia's prosperity, would lend himself to it is truly a cause for lamentation.