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ROTARY CLUB OF MELBOURNE

WINDSOR HOTEL, MELBOURNE, 6 AUGUST 2014

ON THE PRESENTATION OF THE MONASH MEDAL

MONASH, HISTORY, OUTSIDERS AND ROTARY

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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*MONASH AND HISTORY*

We are living through the anniversaries of a most remarkable time. It was a time of terrible failures of leadership. But in that time an Australian, John Monash, found his moment and displayed qualities of leadership which we must all try to emulate in our very different lives.

The past weeks have been notable because, exactly a century ago, they witnessed the outbreak of the Great War, that we call today the First World War. It was the First because, in truth, it gave birth to the Second World War. And this, in turn, led directly to the Cold War. Much of the unrest in today's world can be traced to those fateful days.

But for grave lack of leadership, the First War need not have happened. So many chances were missed that might have averted it. Why, for example, was Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo at all on 8 June 1914 when it was the anniversary of an historic defeat by the Turks centuries before? He had been warned. Well, he was there because the woman he had married and loved, Sophie, was regarded by the Emperor as not truly fit

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to hold her august rank. A member of the minor Czech nobility, she was designated Duchess, not Archduchess.<sup>1</sup> She could not be accorded in Vienna or Budapest the dignities that the royal and imperial couple felt were her due. But in Sarajevo, she would be given full honours. So they wanted to go. In this way, they made their appointment with the assassin's bullets.

A shot on 18 June 1914, soon after their arrival in Sarajevo, resulted in the redirection of their route through that city. But no one had told their driver. The car therefore entered the fateful promenade. When the order to reverse was made, the huge car could not go backwards. The slow attempts to change direction afforded the assassin the unexpected time to strike. Archduke and Duchess were mortally wounded. Vienna demanded accountability. It blamed the Serbs.

Even then, with proper leadership, war might have been averted. In late July 1914, Austria-Hungary made 9 demands on Serbia. All but one of these were substantially accepted. The sticking point was that Austria-Hungary should be involved in the inquiry as to the causes of the assassination. Serbia would not accept that condition. It saw it as inconsistent with its sovereignty. Tzar Nicholas II of all the Russias begged his cousin William II of Germany to intervene to prevent an 'ignoble war against a weak country'. William instead went sailing in the Baltic. Even then war might have been avoided. However, Austria sent its troops into battle and this set in train the troop movements solemnly accepted both in the Franco-Russian alliance and in that of the Central Powers.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers – How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Penguin Books, London, 2012, 370.

Germany, even then, addressed a deferential demand to Belgium, mindful of the Schlieffen plan that warned it to avoid war on two fronts. It begged passage for its soldiers through Belgium into France. It declared no territorial ambitions on Belgium. It promised repair of damage and full compensation. But the Belgian king and Parliament refused this request as incompatible with their country's neutrality and sovereignty.

Even then, the fateful involvement of the ANZAC Corps might have been avoided. British leaders might have held back from intervention. But the German Chancellor's declaration, on 4 August 1914, that the treaty guaranteeing Belgium's neutrality was 'a scrap of paper' mobilised the British public and political opinion. And when the Crown was at war, that meant the Crown everywhere. Including in Australasia.

Leadership is central to the safe conduct of international affairs. Leadership was sorely missing in those fateful days, exactly a century ago. On 3 August 1914 Germany declared war on France. The following day, it declared war on Belgium. Britain delivered an ultimatum demanding that Austria-Hungary to cease its hostilities against Serbia. The world held its breath. But the war took its own pre-ordained, inflexible, unthinking course.

On this very day, 6 August in 1914, the Royal Navy cruiser, HMS *Amphion* was sunk by German mines in the North Sea. This caused the death of 150 sailors: the first British casualties of the War. It was to be a terrible conflict with a huge toll on young lives. Across this newly united, continental nation, war memorials would be built in every town, large and small, to commemorate the dreadful losses. The Gallipoli campaign in 1915 would test the mettle of our arms. And then the attrition of the

Western Front in France and Belgium would claim enormous sacrifices that we remember to this day.

### *MONASH AND LEADERSHIP*

John Monash is one of the most remarkable Australians to have lived. Certainly, he showed great talents of leadership. He was born in Melbourne in 1865, the son of Jewish parents from Prussia. As a boy, he showed large intellectual skills and talent in his chosen profession, civil engineering. Immediately the War broke out in 1914, a century ago, he became a full-time army officer and chief censor of Australia. But he desired an active command. This was accomplished at Gallipoli, where his talents of leadership were quickly noted. After the withdrawal, he was transferred to the Western Front in 1916. Then unfolded a brilliant career in which he was one of the first to see the imperative needs for combined ground, troops, tank and air combat.

In a shocking attrition of manpower, soldiers, including Australian soldiers, were sent into battle against lethal automatic weapons. Some generals on both sides could not see any other way. But Monash, and a few others, knew there had to be a fresh and different way to fight the war, if ever it was to be won.

As the two sides became locked in the murderous futility of trench warfare, Monash also had to do battle against enemies at home. Keith Murdoch, the publisher, mounted a relentless campaign in his newspapers, demanding the replacement of Monash. Fortunately, Prime Minister Billy Hughes went to the front to check for himself. He found no prejudice amongst those who mattered against Monash, either

for his Jewish or German origins. The whispering campaign was ignored. Monash was confirmed.

In July 1918 at Le Hamel, Monash helped to win a significant victory for the Allies. And then, on the famous 8 August 1918, the battle of Amiens erupted. Monash's Australian soldiers were the virtual spearhead of the British army, and they "were glorious".<sup>2</sup> This initiative contributed notably to the breaking of the Hindenburg line. General Hindenburg described 8 August 1918 as "our great disaster from which there could be no recovery". General Ludendorff said it was "the black day of the German army".<sup>3</sup> The Great War concluded less than 3 months later.

Monash had proved attentive and protective of the lives of his army. He worried about their food and their fatigue. Above all, he was careful with their blood. He did not alone win the Great War. But his strategy was original and painstaking. It used all available technologies. So greatly respected was it amongst the German military, that they studied it closely. It was to become a foundation of the highly successful *Blitzkrieg* tactics of the German army when the Second War reopened hostilities in September 1939.

### *ALIEN AND OUTSIDER*

All his life, Monash was something of an outsider. Although not a religiously observant Jew, he grew up proudly in the culture of his people. As the years went on, he accepted the special communal feelings of Jewish congregations, both in Melbourne and in London. As a boy he had celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in East Melbourne. In his last

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<sup>2</sup> G. Serle, "Monash, Sir John", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 10 (MUP, Melbourne, 1986) 543 at 547.

<sup>3</sup> G. Serle, *John Monash: A Biography* (Melbourne 1982), 347.

years, he became the figurehead leader of the Zionist Federation in Australia. Colin McInnes claimed that his prestige and reputation made 'anti-Semitism, as a 'respectable' attitude, impossible in Australia'.<sup>4</sup> At home, Monash was bilingual. On the Western Front, he astonished the German prisoners by speaking to them in fluent, perfect German. Yet it was this ethnicity that lay behind the whispers and animosity he had to overcome. Even those who acknowledged Monash's skills in soldiery belittled him. Charles Bean, the official war historian, wrote in his diary of Monash:

“We do not want Australia represented by men mainly because of their ability, natural and inborn in Jews, to push themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

To say that prejudice against Jews was “almost impossible” in Australia because of Monash is simply not true if the objective facts are remembered. Those who visit the *Anne Frank Huis* in Amsterdam will know that, on departure, a map of the world shows how few Jewish refugees were accepted in their struggle to escape the murderous Nazi tyranny in Europe. The map reveals that Australia took precious few. Even today, by comparison with other Western countries, we take comparatively few refugees. In Monash's day, these were the “reffos”. They were not popular in Australia after the Great War and well into the 1930s as the Holocaust unfolded. They are not popular today.

So Monash had to overcome prejudice and hostility based on his origins, religion and ethnicity: characteristics he had not chosen and could not really change. He had faults and flaws, as we all do. He constantly

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<sup>4</sup> G. Serle, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *ibid* 549.

<sup>5</sup> G. Serle, above, n2, 301.

craved for acknowledgement and recognition. Great was the satisfaction when he became the first military leader in 200 years invested with a knighthood by King George V on the field of battle on 12 August 1918, four days after Amiens.<sup>6</sup>

There was another reason why Monash suffered discrimination. As his family well knew, he had a long-time companion in his friend, Lizette Bentwich, a miniature painter.<sup>7</sup> This relationship and love, known to his wife, seems to have been akin to that between King Edward VII, Queen Alexandra and Mrs Keppel. But, in the straight-laced royal court of the George V, Lizette would not be admitted. In London, the same attitude that had bedevilled Duchess Sophie appeared; fortunately without the grave consequences.

### *A PERSONAL LINK*

All of us in life, in big and small ways, are confronted with challenges of leadership; by demands for fresh thinking utilising new technology; and by obligations to overcome hostility and animosity.

In my own case, over the past year, I have had the privilege to chair a Commission of Inquiry (COI) established by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. This Inquiry was set up to investigate, and report on, egregious wrongs against the human rights of the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). The problem had been neglected for decades. It seemed too hard to tackle. The great powers were locked into a kind of modern trench warfare. Here was

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<sup>6</sup> G. Serle, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 547.

<sup>7</sup> G. Serle, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 548.

North Korea - one of the last bastions of the Cold War. No steps seemed to succeed in procuring change. Something new and quite different was required if the United Nations were to succeed.

Eventually, the Human Rights Council created its Commission of Inquiry. With fine colleagues from Indonesia and Serbia (thereby hangs a modern tale) I was chosen to lead the investigation. Challenges we faced immediately because North Korea refused to allow us entry to their territory. How, in these circumstances, could we secure up to date, accurate and convincing evidence to describe the human rights situation there?

What was needed was original thinking. The use of the latest technology. Engagement with entirely new ideas. So, with my colleagues, we decided to undertake our inquiry in quite a different way from those carried on in the past. Instead of investigating in private, we would conduct our investigation under the gaze of international media. We would take testimony publicly, so long as it was safe to gather it in that way. We would film it and place it online so that the whole world could see. We would counter-act the denunciation from North Korea of our witnesses and evidence by a fearless strategy of transparency. Never has a report of a COI of the United Nations proceeded in this way.<sup>8</sup>

When I handed the report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations (Ban Ki-moon) he said to me:

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on *Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Geneva, 7 February 2014 A/HRC/25/63.

‘You told me that you would undertake this inquiry in a different way. You certainly have’.

The result has been to galvanise international opinion. The report won overwhelming support for action by the United Nations that will secure accountability for human rights abuses to the people of North Korea. Such accountability will not be won by force of arms. It will be won by the power of the great principles of human rights. And let it never be forgotten that those principles were themselves the outcome of the Second World War. They became the core of the 1945 *Charter* of the United Nations. They appear in Eleanor Roosevelt’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted in 1948, announced by another Australian with large international influence: Hebert Vere Evatt, President of the UN General Assembly.

When I had almost completed my task as chair of the COI on North Korea, I thought that past sources of discrimination against me had at last been overcome. No one had mentioned my sexuality. It was simply irrelevant to the task in hand. But then, someone in the over-large security apparatus of North Korea must have thought to look me up on my website. This is unavailable through the internet to ordinary people in North Korea. But the elite can search and find.

In the internet, my engagement with my community, and with outsiders, is openly mentioned. The outcome was a denunciation of the United Nations for choosing a homosexual to investigate human rights in North Korea. Even an attack on my partner of 45 years, Johan, for daring to think it might be time for marriage. Happily, this attack fell on stony ground. No one took it up. It was seen to be, as it was, completely

irrelevant. Many of us have some feature that makes us outsiders to others. By accomplishment and engagement with our fellows, we can, like Monash, overcome hostility and do bold things.

### *MONASH AND ROTARY*

It was typical of Monash, after the Great War, that he should become a leader in the establishment of Rotary International in Australia. He was one of the founders of the Rotary Club of Melbourne. He became its second president. This was a way, one of many, by which he could continue his engagement with Australia when the War was over. He could do this in Australia's civil society which, ultimately, the War had been fought to protect and to maintain.

So what lessons can we draw today for Rotary International, and specifically for this Club? They are, I suggest, the same three lessons:

First, there is a need for leadership. Not pugnacious, mindless, unthinking leadership, such as preceded General Monash on the Western Front. Innovative, interactive, mutually respectful leadership of the kind that Monash displayed when he insisted that his soldiers must be fed hot meals; and that their lives must be treasured and not thrown away; and that new strategies had to be tried if the war was to be won. Rotary must adapt to new ways. And that will require innovative leadership

Secondly, Rotary must learn from Monash's engagement with new technology. It must embrace the internet; social networks, Twitter, LinkedIn, You Tube. It must be more daring and adventurous. It must

reach out to the thousands who are presently untapped. They are unaware of Rotary. The result is an organisation that may appear to some too white, too grey, too male.

I thought of this as I walked up Bourke Street, on my way to this beautiful 19<sup>th</sup> century meeting room. The signals that Rotary and its Melbourne Club send out must become more modern, more digital and more frequent. They must compete in the clatter of informatics. The old ways will not work today. Continuing with them is like sending troops over the top against machine guns and aerial strafing.

And thirdly, Rotary must overcome discrimination and prejudice. It must be a place with fewer pale males and more women. Walking up Bourke I saw the face of Australia today. There is a mighty shift in our population. Huge numbers of working women. Greatly increased numbers of non-Caucasians. Arab Australians. Asian Australians. African Australians. Rotary must reach out to them. It must embrace the disabled. People of different cultures and new vocations. It must encourage membership by gays and other sexual minorities. It must be a true reflection of today's Australia. Remembering and honouring our past. But also celebrating and embracing our present and our future.

To the Rotary Club of Melbourne – Monash's club – I express a citizen's grateful thanks for the award of the 2014 Monash Medal. I re-dedicate myself, with it, to change and renewal in Australia – and in Rotary.