



Richard Flanagan: 'Our politics is a dreadful black comedy' – press club speech in full

Indigenous Australia, Anzac Day, the descent of democracy – in a National Press Club address Flanagan examines a divided Australia which he says can be free only if it faces up to its past

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I told a friend the other day I was to be speaking here in Canberra today and she told me a joke. A man is doubled over at the front of Parliament House throwing up. A stranger comes up and puts an arm around the vomiting man. I know how you feel, the stranger says.

It's not a bad joke. But it felt familiar. I went searching my book shelves, and finally found a variation of it in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, set in communist Czechoslovakia in the dark years after the Prague Spring. In Kundera's version the two men are standing in Wenceslas Square.

Both jokes are about failing regimes that have lost the essential moral legitimacy governments need to govern. We don't have to like or agree with a government but we still accept it has the right to make decisions in our name. Until, that is, we don't. And it occurred to me that in both jokes it's not just those in immediate power but a whole system that is beginning to lose its moral legitimacy.

As a young man I was studying in England, which I didn't much enjoy, and spent most of my time in Yugoslavia, which I got to know through my wife's family, who were Slovene, and which I enjoyed very much. Yugoslavia was then a communist dictatorship, but it occupied a curious place, halfway between the Soviet and capitalist system.

Yugoslavs were a well-educated, cultured people. But the system, like that of the Czechs, lost its legitimacy after Tito's death in the mid 80s. A credit crisis became a full blown economic and then political crisis. Opportunistic politicians, devoid of solutions to the nation's problems, instead pitched neighbour against neighbour. And suddenly nothing held.

I witnessed a country slide into inexplicable nationalisms and ethnic hatreds, and in the space of a very short time, into genocidal madness.

It made me realise at a young age that the veneer of civilised societies is very thin, a fragile thing that once broken brings forth monsters.

Czechoslovakia took a different route. After the final toppling of the system with the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the revolution's leader, Vaclav Havel, wrote presciently of how the west should not gloat over the fall of the old Soviet states. Eastern Europe was, he observed, simply a twisted mirror reflecting back a slightly more distorted image of what might come to prevail in the west. If the west only gloated and did not learn from what that image portended of its future, it too might find itself one day facing a similar existential crisis.

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In the heady 1990s Havel's warnings sounded absurd and overwrought. And yet it came to pass as Havel warned: the west did gloat, declaring the end of history, and in its triumphalism dangerous new forces were allowed to fester unchecked, their scale and threat only becoming fully apparent in the past few years.

Now in Russia, in Turkey, in Poland, in Hungary and the Czech Republic we see the rise of the strongman leader, some like Putin, already effectively dictators, others like Erdogan and Orban well on the way. In Slovakia a leading journalist was recently murdered after exposing links between leading Slovakian politicians and the Italian Mafia.

There are no saviours of democracy on the horizon. Rather, around the world we see a new authoritarianism that is always anti-democratic in practice, populist in appeal, nationalist in sentiment, fascist in sympathy, criminal in disposition, tending to spew a poisonous rhetoric aimed against refugees, Muslims, and increasingly Jews, and hostile to truth and those who speak it, most particularly journalists to the point, sometimes, of murder.

And yet this new authoritarianism is resonant with so many, acting as it does as a justification for rule by a few wealthy oligarchs and corporations, and as an explanation for the growing immiseration of the many.

In Australia though we feel ourselves, as ever, a long way away. We feel we are somehow immune from these dangerous currents. After all, we have had routine forays into populist extremism from the mid 1990s with the likes of Hansonism without it ever threatening our democracy. Our politics may be dreadful, a black comedy pregnant with collapse, its actors exhausted, without imagination or courage or principle, solely obsessed with pillaging the tawdry jewels of office and fleeing into distant sinecures as ambassadors or high commissioners, or with paid up Chinese board posts, while outside the city burns. But it is all very far from a dictatorship.

Leadership nowhere to be found

Our society grows increasingly more unequal, more disenfranchised, angrier, more fearful. Even in my home town of Hobart, as snow settles on the mountain, there is the deeply shameful spectacle of a tent village of the homeless, the number of which increase daily. We sense the rightful discontent of the growing numbers locked out from a future. From hope.

Instead of public debate, scapegoats are offered up – the boatperson, the queue jumper, the Muslim – a xenophobia both parties have been guilty of playing on for electoral benefit for two decades. Instead of new ideas and new visions we are made wallow in threadbare absurdities and convenient fictions: Australia Day, the world's most liveable cities, secure borders.

Our institutions are frayed. Our polity is discredited, and almost daily discredits itself further. The many problems that confront us, from housing to infrastructure to climate change, are routinely evaded. Our screens are filled with a preening peloton of potential leaders, but nowhere is there to be found leadership.

Holderlin, the great 19th century poet, wrote of the “mysterious yearning toward the chasm” that can overtake nations. Increasingly, one can sense that yearning in the overly heated rhetoric of some Australian politicians and commentators. That yearning can overtake Australia as easily as it has many other countries, damaging our democratic institutions, our freedoms and our values.

Politics, which ought to have as its highest calling the task of holding society together, of keeping us away from the chasm, has retreated to repeating divisive myths that have no foundation in the truth of what we are as a nation, and so, finally only serve to contribute to the forces that could yet destroy us. Or worse yet, openly stoking needless fear and, with the refugee issue, a xenophobia for short-term electoral advantage.

The consequence is a time bomb which simply needs as a detonator what every other country has had and we have not: hard times. But hard times will return. And when they do what defence will we have should a populist movement that trades on the established scapegoats arise? An authoritarian party with a charismatic leader that uses the poison with which the old myths are increasingly pregnant to deliver itself power?

The challenge that faces us, the grave and terrifying challenge, is to transform ourselves as a people. This fundamental challenge is not policy, it is not franking credits nor is it tax giveaways or rail links, necessary or not as these things may be. It is to realise that if we don't create for ourselves a liberating vision founded in the full truth of who we are as a people, we will find ourselves, in a moment of crisis, suddenly entrapped in a new authoritarianism wearing the motley of the old lies.

For we are a people of astonishing perversity.

We are an ancient country that insists on thinking itself new. We are a modern nation that insists our recent arrangements are so time honoured that none of them can ever be changed. We are a complex country that insists on being simple minded. We regard simplicity as a national virtue, and when coupled with language unimpeded by the necessity for thought, is regarded as strong character. Which may explain our treasurer Scott Morrison, but little else.

And for the past two decades we have doubled down and doubled down again on old myths – lies – that become more dangerous the longer we allow them to go unchallenged.

Six days from now, on the eve of Anzac Day, the prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, will launch a war memorial-cum-museum in France. Costing an extraordinary \$100m, the Monash Centre is reportedly the most expensive museum built in France for many years. It will honour those Australians who so tragically lost their lives on the western front in world war one and, more generally, the 62,000 Australians who died in world war one.

Would that someone might whisper into the prime minister's ear the last lines of Wilfred Owen's poem about those same fatal trenches:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori.

Owen's last Latin phrase – the old lie, as he puts it – is from the Roman poet Horace: “It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.”

Except the Australians didn't even die for Australia. They died for Britain. For *their* empire. Not our country. A double lie then: a lie within a lie.

But, as Tony Abbott asked when, as prime minister, he announced the building of the museum, what was the alternative in Britain's time of need?

Well, we might answer, staying home for one thing, and not dying in other people's wars.

And yet the horrific suffering of so many Australians for distant empires has now become not a terrible warning, not a salient story of the blood-sacrifice that must be paid by nations lacking independence, not the unhappy beginning of an unbroken habit, but, bizarrely, the purported origin story of us as an independent people.

The growing state-funded cult of Anzac will see \$1.1bn spent by the Australian government on war memorials between 2014 and 2028. Those who lost their lives deserve honour – I know from my father's experience how meaningful that can be. But when veterans struggle for recognition and support for war-related suffering, you begin to wonder what justifies this expense, this growing militarisation of national memory or, to be more precise, a forgetting of anything other than an official version of war as the official version of our country's history, establishing dying in other people's wars as our foundation story.

And so, the Monash Centre, for all its good intentions, for all the honour it does the dead, is at heart a centre for forgetting. It leads us to forget that the 62,000 young men who died in world war one died far from their country in service of one distant empire fighting other distant empires. It leads us to forget that not one of those deaths it commemorates was necessary. Not 62,000. Not even one.

Lest we forget we will all chant next week, as we have all chanted for a century now. And yet it is as if all that chanting only ensures we remember nothing. If we remembered would we 100 years later still allow our young men to be sent off to kill or be killed in distant conflicts defending yet again not our country, but another distant empire, as we have in Iraq and Afghanistan?

If all that chanting simply reinforces such forgetting, then what hope have we now in negotiating some independent, safe path for our country between the growing tension of another dying empire, the American, and the rising new empire of the Chinese? Because instead of learning from the tragedies of our past, we are ensuring that we will learn nothing.

The forgetting extends to the horrific suffering of war. The prime minister who will, no doubt, speak sincerely and movingly of the torn bodies and broken lives of the Australians who fell in France, is also the same prime minister who wants to see the Australian arms industry become one of the world's top 10 defence exporters, seeking to boost exports to several countries, including what was described as “the rapidly growing markets in Asia and the Middle East”, in particular the United Arab Emirates, a country accused of war crimes in Yemen.

Anzac Day, which is a very important day for my family, was always a day to remember all my father's mates who didn't make it home. But it was also a moment to ponder the horror of war more

generally. But of late Anzac Day has become enshrouded in cant and entangled in dangerous myth. If this seems overstated ponder the bigoted bile that attended Yassmin Abdel-Magied's tweet last Anzac Day in which she posted "LEST.WE.FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)"

I read this as a plea for compassion drawing on the memory of a national trauma.

Most refugees on Manus Island and Nauru are fleeing war, Syria has half a million dead and more than 11 million people exiled internally and externally because of war, and Palestinians, whatever position one takes, suffer greatly from ongoing conflict.

And yet as the attacks on Abdel-Magied showed, some were seeking to transform Anzac Day into a stalking horse for racism, misogyny and anti-Islamic sentiment. For hate, intolerance and bigotry. For all those very forces that create war. The great disrespect to Anzac Day wasn't the original tweet but the perverted attacks made on it, in, of all things, the name of the dead. Those who think they honour Anzac Day by forgetting contemporary victims of war only serve to make a tragic mockery of all that it should be.

Freedom means Australia facing up to the truth of its past

We should, of course, question these things more. We could ask why – if we were actually genuine about remembering patriots who have died for this country – why would we not first spend \$100m on a museum honouring the at least 65,000 estimated Indigenous dead who so tragically lost their lives defending their country here in Australia in the frontier wars of the 1800s? Why is there nowhere in Australia telling the stories of the massacres, the dispossession, and the courageous resistance of these patriots?

The figure of 65,000, I should add, is one arrived at by two academics at the University of Queensland and applies only to Indigenous deaths in Queensland. If their methodology is correct, the numbers for the Indigenous fallen nationally must be extraordinarily large.

As one prominent commentator noted, "Individually and collectively, it was sacrifice on a stupendous scale. We should be a nation of memory, not just of memorials, for these are our foundation stories. They should be as important to us as the ride of Paul Revere, or the last stand of King Harold at Hastings, or the incarceration of Nelson Mandela might be to others."

The commentator was Tony Abbott, announcing the French museum, speaking of the dead of world war one.

And yet how can his argument be said not to also hold for the Indigenous dead? After all, Sir John Monash became a great military leader in spite of considerable prejudice. And so too Pemulwuy and Jundamurra.

Of course, such a reasonable and necessary proposal as a museum for the Indigenous fallen would at first be greeted with ridicule and contempt. Because in the deepest, most fundamental way we are not free of our colonial past. Freedom exists in the shadow of memory. For Australia to find out what freedom means it has to face up to the truth of its past. And it's time we decided to accept what we are and where we come from, because only in that truth can we finally be free as a people.

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Sixty years ago, the scientific consensus was that Indigenous Australians had been in Australia for only 6,000 years. But through a series of breath-taking discoveries, science has confirmed what Indigenous people always knew: that they have been here for at least 60,000 years.

It makes you wonder if the \$500m earmarked for renovating the Australian War Memorial would not be more wisely spent on a world class national Indigenous museum that honours a past unparalleled in human history? Surely, when we have the oldest continuous civilisation on Earth, is not such a major institution central to our understanding of ourselves as a people? Is it not necessary, and fundamental to us as a nation?

It is, after all, extraordinary, and beyond a disgrace that there is in the 21st century no museum telling that extraordinary story, so that all Australians might know it, so that the world might share in it, and so that we might learn something of the struggle and achievement, the culture and unique civilisations that were and are Indigenous Australia.

We have turned our back on this profound truth again and again, because to acknowledge it is also to acknowledge the other great truth of Australia: that the prosperity of contemporary Australia was built on the destruction of countless Indigenous lives up to the present day, and with them dreamings, songlines, languages, alternative ways of comprehending not only our extraordinary country but the very cosmos.

And yet if we were to have the courage and largeness to acknowledge as a nation both truths about our past, we would discover a third truth, an extraordinary and liberating truth for our future, about who we are and where we might go.

We would discover that though this land and its people were colonised, a 60,000-year-old civilisation is not so easily snuffed out. And the new people who came to Australia, in their dealings with black Australia, were also indigenised, and, in the mash up, Indigenous values of land, of country, of time, of family, of space and story, became strong among non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous ways, forms, understandings permeated our mentality in everything from Australian rules football to our sense of humour.

As much as there was a process of colonisation, there was also a history of indigenisation – a frequently repressed, often violent process in which a white underclass took on many black ways of living and sometimes, more fundamentally, thinking and feeling, in which may be traced continuities that extend back into deep time.

We would discover that we are not Europeans nor are we Asians. That we are not a new country. We are in the first instance a society that begins in deep time. That is the bedrock of our civilisation as Australians, our birthright, and if we would accept it, rather than spurn it, we might discover so many new possibilities for ourselves as a people.

A war of extermination

My own island is a good example of both processes. There took place there what was described, not by a contemporary left-wing academic, but an 1830s Van Diemonian attorney general, as “a war of extermination” of the Tasmanian Aborigines. A terrible war of which fewer than 100 people survived, the forebears of today’s 25,000-strong Palawa population.

To this day Tasmanian society is shaped by the tragedy of a land where the English, as a ship’s captain’s wife, Rosalie O’Hare, confided in her diary in 1828, “consider the massacre of these people an honour”.

But it was, for a critical time, also a land where many ex-convicts, to quote a contemporary witness, “dress in kangaroo skins without linen and wear sandals made of seal skins. They smell like foxes.” They live in “bark huts like the natives, not cultivating anything, but living entirely on kangaroos, emus, and small porcupines”. In coming to understand how to live in this strange new world, they took on Aboriginal partners, ways of life and thinking.

No less an authority than John West, the first official editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, wrote in 1856 that whites living outside of the two major Van Diemonian settlements “had a way of life somewhat resembling that of the Aborigines”.

The bush became freedom, and for a time the Van Diemonian authorities feared a jacquerie in which the ex-convicts would make common cause with the Aboriginal population.

It was a messy, often brutal, inescapably human response to extraordinary times and places, out of which emerged a new people. It was a revolution of sense and sensibilities so extraordinary it is even now hard to fully compass its liberating dimensions.

If this history is frequently terrible, it is also finally a history of hope for us all. For it shows we are not dispossessed Europeans, but a muddy wash of peoples made anew in the meeting of a pre-industrial, pre-modern European culture with a remarkable Indigenous culture and an extraordinary natural world

George Orwell once said that the hardest thing to see is what is in front of your face.

This is what is in front of ours.

We became our own people, not a poor imitation of elsewhere.

We pretend that our national identity is a fixed, frozen thing, but Australia is a molten idea. We have only begun to think of ourselves as Australians within living memory. There was no legal concept of an Australian citizen until 1948. Twenty years later, the Australian population was still divided into three official categories by the ABS in its official year book: British: born in Australia; British: born overseas, and foreign.

Indigenous Australia wasn't even recorded as a general category.

Indigenous Australia has, after great thought and wide discussion, asked that it be heard, and that this take the form of an advisory body to parliament – a body that would be recognised in the constitution.

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“What a gift this is that we give you,” Galarrwuy Yunupingu has said, “if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way.”

The gift we are being offered is vast; the patrimony of 60,000 years, and with it the possibilities for the future that it opens up to us. We can choose to have our beginning and our centre in Indigenous culture. Or we can choose to walk away, into a misty world of lies and evasions, pregnant with the possibility of future catastrophe.

But this gift needs honouring in what Yunupingu calls a “meaningful way”. It needs honouring with institutions, with monuments, with this profound history being made central in our account of ourselves and, above all, with what the Indigenous people have asked for repeatedly: constitutional recognition.

In truth, we can no longer go forward without addressing this matter. We cannot hope to be a republic if this is not at the republic's core, because otherwise we are only repeating the error of the colonialists and the federationists before us.

At a moment when democracy around the world is imperilled we are being offered, with the Uluru statement, the chance to complete our democracy, to make it stronger, more inclusive, and more robust.

And we would be foolish to turn that offer down.

That saying the things that I have said today might be deemed unreasonable, or shrill, or farfetched, should remind us all of how intolerable the situation remains in this country for Indigenous people, how unbearable it must be for Indigenous people to know that their patrimony, their 60-millennia-old culture, which they are willing to share, which has shaped and continues to shape much of what is best in Australia, will, however, continue to be treated as marginal, and they, again, humiliated.

Even if you have no respect for Indigenous Australia, you should care for the future of your country. And now, more than ever, we need ways of bringing us together, not, as, for example, Australia Day presently does, dividing us. We need a large and open vision sustained in truth, not myths that encourages dangerous illusions.

I know these are large ideas. But perhaps they are the ideas for these times. None of these things are easy. None will be quickly arrived at.

But the alternative is worse; the alternative is the slow collapse, it is the many cracks which are already appearing; the inequality; the grounds for an authoritarian revolt, for a hopelessly divided country. It is Holderlin's yearning for the chasm.

Definitions belong to the definer not the defined. For 20 years Australians lived with the definition that they were selfish, xenophobic, self-interested and incapable of being roused on larger issues.

But the marriage equality debate proved it was not so. Since the marriage equality vote it's clear that Australians are not the mean and pinched people we had been persuaded and bluffed for so many years that we were.

We are not small-minded bigots. We are, as it turns out, people who care. We are people who feel and who think. Australia is not a fixed entity, a collection of outdated bigotries and reactionary credos, but rather the invitation to dream, and this country – our country – belongs to its dreamers.

And if after more than 20 years of groundhog day we are finally ready to once more go forward as a people it's time our dreamers were brought in from the cold, and with them Galarrwuy Yunupingu's great gift of the Australian dreaming.