

Voting in Britain for war. Take your pick

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Edwardian notions of war are again being promoted in western democracies, along with the militarising of history, journalism and parliamentary politics. In Britain, the three main candidates for prime minister are declared warmakers; and yet popular feeling is very different.

Staring at the vast military history section in the airport shop, I had a choice: the derring-do of psychopaths or scholarly tomes with their illicit devotion to the cult of organised killing. There was nothing I recognised from reporting war. Nothing on the spectacle of children's limbs hanging in trees and nothing on the burden of shit in your trousers. War is a good read. War is fun. More war please.

The day before I flew out of Australia, 25 April, I sat in a bar beneath the great sails of the Sydney Opera House. It was Anzac Day, the 95th anniversary of the invasion of Ottoman Turkey by Australian and New Zealand troops at the behest of British imperialism. The landing was an incompetent stunt of blood sacrifice conjured by Winston Churchill; yet it is celebrated in Australia as an unofficial national day. The ABC evening news always comes live from the sacred shore at Gallipoli, in Turkey, where this year some 8000 flag-wrapped Antipodeans listened, dewy-eyed, to the Australian governor-general Quentin Bryce, who is the Queen's viceroy, describe the point of pointless mass killing. It was, she said, all about a "love of nation, of service, of family, the love we give and the love we receive and the love we allow ourselves to receive. [It is a love that] rejoices in the truth, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And it never fails".

Of all the attempts at justifying state murder I can recall, this drivel of DIY therapy, clearly aimed at the young, takes the blue riband. Not once did Bryce honour the fallen with the two words that the survivors of 1915 brought home with them: "Never again". Not once did she refer to a truly heroic anti-conscription campaign, led by women, that stemmed the flow of Australian blood in the first world war, the product not of a gormlessness that "believes all things" but of anger in defence of life.

The next item on the TV news was an Australian government minister, John Faulkner, with the troops in Afghanistan. Bathed in the light of a perfect sunrise, he made the Anzac connection to the illegal invasion of Afghanistan in which, on 13 February last year, Australian soldiers killed five children. No mention was made of them. On cue, this was followed by an item that a war memorial in Sydney had been "defaced by men of Middle Eastern appearance". More war please.

In the Opera House bar a young man wore campaign medals which were not his. That is the fashion now. Smashing his beer glass on the floor, he stepped over the mess which was

cleaned up another young man whom the TV newsreader would say was of Middle Eastern appearance. Once again, war is a fashionable extremism for those suckered by the Edwardian notion that a man needs to prove himself “under fire” in a country whose people he derides as “gooks” or “rag-heads” or simply “scum”. (The current public inquiry in London into the torture and murder of an Iraqi hotel receptionist, Baha Mousa, by British troops has heard that “the attitude held” was that “all Iraqis were scum”).

There is a hitch. In the ninth year of the thoroughly Edwardian invasion of Afghanistan, more than two thirds of the home populations of the invaders want their troops to get out of where they have no right to be. This is true of Australia, the United States, Britain, Canada and Germany. What this says is that, behind the media façade of politicised ritual – such as the parade of military coffins through the English town of Wootton Bassett – millions of people are trusting their own critical and moral intelligence and ignoring propaganda that has militarised contemporary history, journalism and parliamentary politics – Australia’s Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, for instance, describes the military as his country’s “highest calling”.

Here in Britain, the war criminal Tony Blair is anointed by the Guardian’s Polly Toynbee as “the perfect emblem for his people’s own contradictory whims”. No, he was the perfect emblem for a liberal intelligentsia prepared cynically to indulge his crime. That is the unsaid of the British election campaign, along with the fact that 77 per cent of the British people want the troops home. In Iraq, duly forgotten, what has been done is a holocaust. More than a million people are dead and four million have been driven from their homes. Not a single mention has been made of them in the entire campaign. Rather, the news is that Blair is Labour’s “secret weapon”.

All three party leaders are warmongers. Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrats leader and darling of former Blair lovers, says that as prime minister he will “participate” in another invasion of a “failed state” provided there is “the right equipment, the right resources”. His one condition is the standard genuflection towards a military now scandalised by a colonial cruelty of which the Baha Mousa case is but one of many.

For Clegg, as for Gordon Brown and David Cameron, the horrific weapons used by British forces, such as clusters, depleted uranium and the Hellfire missile, which sucks the air out of its victims’ lungs, do not exist. The limbs of children in trees do not exist. This year alone Britain will spend £4 billion on the war in Afghanistan, and that is what Brown and Cameron almost certainly intend to cut from the National Health Service.

Edward S Herman explained this genteel extremism in his essay, *The Banality of Evil*. There is a strict division of labour, ranging from the scientists working in the laboratories of the weapons industry, to the intelligence and “national security” personnel who supply the paranoia and “strategies”, to the politicians who approve them. As for journalists, our task is to censor by omission and make the crime seem normal for you, the public. For it is your understanding and your awakening that are feared, above all.

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