



Comment on objections 28

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The Australian Electoral Commission
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COMMENTS REGARDING OBJECTIONS OF NEW ACT DIVISION OF "BEAN"

I write in response to a number of objections lodged against the proposed naming of the new ACT electorate of 'Bean' after Australia's First World War Official Historian, Charles Bean.

This submission does not comment on the names of other worthy Australians put forward for consideration by the Commission but solely the objections to the Commission's preferred name of 'Bean'.

Claims by a number of objectors that Bean was a lifelong anti-semitic and should not have an electorate named after him due to his 'racist and anti-Semitic' views, based upon Bean's early treatment and writings in relation to General Sir John Monash, ignore much of the man's life, contribution and character.

Geoffrey Serle explored the relationship between Monash and Bean in detail in his seminal work *John Monash: A Biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1982). Serle's writing makes clear the prejudice that Bean held and also the fact that such views were common in Bean's day:

'Though he eventually came to respect Monash greatly, Bean disliked and did not understand him... Bean had some conventional prejudices about Jewish characteristics, he disliked Monash's showmanship and his flagrant disregard of the censorship, suspected that he worked deviously behind the scenes for promotion and was subservient to Haig, and believed he had put his finger on basic flaws in Monash's character in that he tended to conceal the truth, was sly and shifty... In particular, he was sure that Monash was so ambitious for glory that the lives of the Corps were not safely to be entrusted to him. Thus he was misguided enough to plot with Murdoch to replace Monash with his hero White.' (p. 397)

Bean's motivation, as he wrote in *Two Men I Knew: William Bridges and Brudenell White, Founders of the AIF* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1957), was not rooted in prejudice but in his belief that others may well have been better to command the Australian Corps:

"Whatever I may have believed it to be at the time, my motive was to see retained in the leading position in the AIF the most noble and ... most brilliant of our leaders. At that time neither Monash nor White was intimately known to the troops, or indeed to any of the staff except those who came into close contact with them. Those of us who took action did so, as I afterwards realised, without adequate appreciation of Monash who, though his reputation as a front-line soldier had been poor, was nevertheless a much greater man than most of us then thought" (p.171).

Serle too explains that Bean publicly recanted his private views of Monash:

Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made. C.E.W. Bean

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'Bean largely altered his opinion of Monash after observing his conduct of the Corps in 1918 and, on recognising how untypical his view of him was among soldiers, he retracted many of his harsh judgements. When Monash died – and before – he paid glowing tributes.' (*Monash: A Biography*, p. 198)

Perhaps the greatest tribute Bean gave Monash was published in *The Herald* on 8 October 1931. He described Monash as Australia's 'greatest military leader... neither a hero nor a mighty strategical genius [but] probably the ablest and most successful British corps commander in France'.

Most importantly Bean not only realised he had been wrong about Monash the man, but also the very prejudices that had led him to work with Keith Murdoch to frustrate Monash's promotion during the war. In *War Aims of a Plain Australian* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1945) Bean wrote, "Australian children have to be taught...that our past attitude towards foreigners and strangers is a sign of old-world ignorance".

When these views are combined with the active campaign Bean led to establish for a Jewish refuge in Australia in the 1940's, claims that he was a 'lifelong anti-Semite' are clearly inaccurate. That Bean was able to grow beyond his prejudice, one still common in Australia at the time when he wrote of the need to educate young Australians in this manner, is a sign of the character of the man.

Contrary to claims that naming the new ACT electorate for him would be an embrace of old attitudes, it would be a sign in this context that the shedding of prejudice and intolerance, and in turn learning to accept and embrace diversity, are values treasured by Australians.

It seems clear to me that this is something the broader Jewish community has accepted about Bean too. In placing a permanent Holocaust exhibition in the heart of the Australian War Memorial in 2016 and working with the Jewish community across three states, not a single person raised the issue of Bean's early prejudices towards Monash with me.

Claims that Bean's efforts to unseat Monash during the war would have led to more Australian casualties are also baseless. The tactics implemented by Monash at Hamel and the battle of Amiens in mid-1918 were a major innovation and played a prominent role in helping the allies achieve victory that year. They did not, however, save Australian lives.

Statistics of Australian battle casualties show that the AIF lost more battle casualties (which include dead, wounded and men taken prisoner of war) in the fighting in 1918 than in 1916. Costly though this final year of fighting was, the Australian Corps suffered some 35,000 casualties under Monash between June and November 1918.

Monash, as any general, knew that to win meant spending the lives of the men under his command. In pressing on towards Péronne, on 31 August 1918, Monash went so far as to tell Major General Sir John Gellibrand, the commander of the 3rd Australian Division, that "casualties no longer matter" in the pursuit of victory.

The notion that more Australians would have died under another general simply does not hold up and, particularly in light of the counterfactual nature of such an assertion, should not influence the naming of this electorate.

Another common theme in the objections lodged with the AEC was that Bean had limited impact on or connection to Canberra. These claims ignore the undoubted impact of the largest and most obvious contribution he made to our capital – the Australian War Memorial.

Bean landed with the Australian troops on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. He stayed with them at the front through the entire war, refusing evacuation when he was wounded. At Pozières the following year he was witness to 23,000 Australian casualties in just six weeks. A dying Australian asked him, “Will they remember me in Australia?” From there he conceived the Australian War Memorial.

After the war he spent over a quarter of a century, much of it living or working in Canberra, building the museum and memorial he had envisioned in bloodied fields of France in 1916. Simultaneously he wrote and edited the twelve volumes of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* that were to shape our national understanding of that terrible war and its impact on us as a people.

The Memorial, and what it represents, forms a lasting memory of Canberra, and Australia, for many of the more than 1 million visitors it draws each year as a place of pilgrimage and tourism. From foreign heads of state to those paying respects to their forebears listed on the Roll of Honour to new Australians coming here to understand the values that we as Australians hold dear it gives a better sense of the Australian character and values than any other single location in Canberra.

When it opened in 1941, in the middle of a second global war, the Memorial represented to tens of thousands of Australian families the final resting places of the sons, brothers and fathers lost in such terrible numbers during the First World War who were now buried in faraway lands. Through its position in the heart of Canberra and our nation it showed the country valued the sacrifices of men from each and every community and contributed greatly to the character of Canberra as a truly *national* capital.

It continues, as the centre of national commemoration, to give solace and comfort to a new, thankfully much smaller, community of grieving Australians with family members listed on the Roll of Honour here from modern conflicts and peacekeeping missions.

The Memorial serves another important role as a reminder to those in power that their decisions have consequences. When Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II visited Australia in October 2011, I was watching the news broadcast of her visit to Canberra in my Brussels office on BBC World News.

The British journalist concluded his ‘package’ on the front steps of Parliament House. Looking down Anzac Parade he said, “There is something the Australians have right. Looking from the seat of government here, in the direct line of sight is the Australian War Memorial. It reminds Australia’s politicians that some of their decisions come at a very high price”.

This too is part of Bean’s legacy in Canberra and something that I know from personal experience cannot be underestimated.

Bean’s role in developing the Memorial and our national history are worthy of greater understanding than it is currently afforded. The naming of an electorate for a man who did so much to establish our national character and values, both in how we see ourselves and how the world perceives us, is an overdue recognition of his contribution to the nation.

That Bean be recognised through our democratic institutions is also apt. He was twice offered, and twice refused, a Knighthood. On the second occasion he wrote to the Governor-General, "...it seems to me that in practice, despite certain advantages, the system encourages false values among our people, and that our generation needs above everything to see and aim at true values".

This nation owes Charles Bean a great debt.

Naming the new ACT electorate after him is an appropriate way to honour the man and his legacy to Australia and to Canberra. I urge the Commission to consider the true character and contribution of the man and not simply the elements of his story highlighted in the objections submitted to them.

Yours sincerely

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