

**Tasmanian author, RICHARD FLANAGAN, addressed the *National Press Club* on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2018. This transcript courtesy of the National Press Club.**



**MISHA SCHUBERT:** Well hello, and welcome to the *National Press Club* in Canberra for today's Westpac address. I'm Misha Schubert - one of the vice presidents and directors of the club, and it's my privilege to chair today's event with the acclaimed Australian author Richard Flanagan.

What a treat it is today to welcome to the National Press Club one Australia's finest writers, Richard Flanagan. Richard was born in Longford, Tasmania, in 1961. His novels have accrued numerous honours and are published in 42 countries.

They include *Death of a River Guide*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, *Gould's Book of Fish*, *The Unknown Terrorist* and *Wanting*. And of course, he won the Man Booker Prize for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* in 2014 - drawing on his father's experiences as a slave labourer and prisoner of war on the Thai Burma railway.

His most recent novel, *First Person*, took inspiration from him being drafted, I think, 30 years ago to work on an autobiography of Australia's greatest conman John Friedrich, which Richard ghost wrote in six weeks to make money to write his first novel. Friedrich killed himself in the middle of the book's writing and it was published posthumously, promoting Simon Caterson to

once describe it as, quote: one of the least reliable but most fascinating memoirs in the annals of Australian publishing.

Today, we've handed Richard a blank page and asked him to share a few thoughts on things that have been on his mind of late. They include the rise of authoritarianism, Australian myths, and Indigenous Australia's call for constitutional recognition. So, please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club Richard Flanagan.

**RICHARD FLANAGAN:** Thank you very much, Misha, and thank you all for coming here. And thank you for those very kind alternative facts about me. There is, I must admit, as Sarah Huckabee Sanders last year observed on Donald Trump re-tweeting a neo-Nazi post, truth in it.

I don't need, though, to tell journalists who routinely profile politicians that any truthful biography is finally a form of selective lying. I can confirm one detail. I am a novelist, a difficult calling in a country whose national hero was for many years a celebrity TV gardener. Which perhaps explains why Barnaby Joyce wanted his photo taken with him and not, say, David Malouf.

I told a friend the other day I was to be speaking here in Canberra 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. I didn't think it was a bad joke.

But it did feel familiar. And I went home, and I found a variation of it Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, set in Communist Czechoslovakia, in the dark years following 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 still accept it has the right to make decisions in our name. Until, that is, we don't. And it occurred to me in both jokes it's not just those in immediate power, but a whole system that is beginning to lose its moral legitimacy.

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As a young man I was studying in England, which I didn't much enjoy, and I spent most of my time in Yugoslavia, 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 moral

legitimacy in the wake of 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's 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, Václav Havel, wrote presciently of how the West should not gloat over the fall of the old Soviet states. Eastern Europe had been, he observed, simply a twisted mirror reflecting back a distorted image of what might come to prevail in the West.

The West only gloated and did not learn from what the image pretended of its future. It too might find itself one day facing a similar existential crisis. In the heady 1990s, Havel's warnings sounded absurd and overwrought, and yet it came to pass exactly as Havel warned. The West did gloat, declaring the end of history and in its triumphalism, dangerous new forces were allowed to fester unchecked. The scale and threat only becoming fully apparent in the last few years.

Now, in Russia, in Turkey, in Poland, in Hungary and the Czech Republic even, we see the rise of the strong man leader. Some, like Putin, already effectively dictators; others like Erdogan and [indistinct] 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.

Hostile to the truth and those who speak it, most particularly journalists, to the point, more and more often, of murder. And yet this new authoritarianism is resonant for so many people, 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 many around the world.

In Australia, though, we feel ourselves, as ever, a long way away. We feel we are somehow immune from these currents. After all, we've had routine forays into populism 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 it would seem with pillaging the [indistinct] of office and fleeing into distant sinecures as ambassadors or High Commissioners,

with paid-up Chinese board posts, while outside the city burns, but it is all very far from a dictatorship.

And yet, our society grows increasingly more unequal, more disenfranchised, angrier, more fearful. Even in my hometown of Hobart, as snow settles on the mountain, there is the deeply shameful spectacle of a tent village of the homeless, the numbers 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 boat person, 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 to wallow in threadbare absurdities and convenient fictions: Australia Day, the world's most liveable cities, secure borders.

Our institutions are frayed. Our quality 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. [Indistinct], 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 heated rhetoric of some Australian politicians and commentators. That yearning can overtake Australia as easily as it has so many other countries, damaging our democracy, our freedoms, our values.

Politics - which ought to have as its highest calling the task of holding society together, of keeping us way from [indistinct] chasm - has retreated to repeating device of myths that have no foundation in the truth of what we are as a nation, and so finally contribute only to the forces that could yet destroy us or, worse yet, openly stoking needless fear, as some do, and with the refugee and migrant 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 inevitably must 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 all 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, and 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 Scott Morrison, but little else.

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

Six days from now, on the eve of Anzac Day, Prime Minister Turnbull will launch a war memorial-cum-museum in France. Costing them an extraordinary \$100 million, 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 I, and more generally, the 62,000 Australians who died in World War I.

Would that someone might whisper into the Prime Minister's ear the last line 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, Propatria 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 in 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 \$1.1 billion spent by the Australian Government on war memorials between 2014 and 2028.

Those who lost their lives deserve honour, and 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 particular 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 its heart, a centre for forgetting. It leads us to forget that the 62,000 young men who died in World War I died in the 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 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 even extends to the horrific suffering of war.

The Prime Minister, who will no doubt speak genuinely and 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 that as a plea for compassion, drawing on the memory of a national trauma.

Most refugees on Manus and Nauru are fleeing war; the terrible war in Syria that's left 500,000 dead and over 11 million people exiled internally and externally; and the Palestinians, whatever position one takes, suffer greatly from ongoing conflict. And yet, as the attacks on AbdelMagied showed, some were seeking to transform Anzac Day into a stalking horse for racism, misogyny, anti-Islamic sentiment.

In other words, for hate, for intolerance, for 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 day should be.

We should, of course, question these things more. We could even go so far as to ask why, if we're actually genuine about remembering patriots who have died for this country, why we would not first spend \$100 million 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 19th century.

Why is there nowhere in Australia telling the story of the massacres, the dispossession, 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 that state. 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, the commentator went on, 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 Mandela might be to others.

The prominent commentator was Tony Abbott, announcing the French museum, speaking of the dead of World War I. And yet, how can his argument be said not to also hold for the Indigenous dead? After all, Sir John Monash became the great military leader he was in spite of considerable prejudice and so, too, Pemulwuy and Jandamarra.

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 the 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. Sixty years ago, the scientific consensus was that Indigenous Australians had been in Australia for only 6000 years. But through a series of breathtaking 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 \$500 million 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, you might think, 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, is it not 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 and with them dreamings, song-lines, 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 all Australians' 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 also among non-Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous ways, forms, understandings, permeated our mentality and everything from Australian Rules football to our sense of humour. As much as there was a process of colonisation, there was also this 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.

And if we were to pursue this idea, we would discover that we are not Europeans, nor are we Asians. That we are not a new country; that we are in the first instance a society that begins in deep time. That is the bed rock of our civilisation as Australians. That is our birth right. And if we would accept it rather than spurn it, we might discover so many new possibilities for ourselves as a people.

My own island is a good example of both processes. That took place there what was described, not by a contemporary left-wing academic, but a 1830s Vandemonian Attorney-General, as a war of extermination. A terrible war of which less than 100 people survived, from whom today's 25,000-strong Palawa people are descended.

To this day, Tasmanian society is shaped by the tragedy of a land where the English - as a ship's captain's wife ... confided in her diary in 1828 - considered the massacre of these people as 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 porcupines.

In coming to understand how to live in this strange new world, they took on Aboriginal partners, friends, ways of life and thinking. No less an authority than John West, the first editor of the

*Sydney Morning Herald*, wrote in 1856 that the Vandemonians living outside of the two major settlements had a way of life resembling that of the Aborigines.

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 encompass its liberating dimensions. And 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 pre-industrial, pre-modern European culture with a remarkable Indigenous culture.

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. 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 the following 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. But that same Indigenous Australia has, after great thought and wide discussion, asked in the Uluru Statement that it be heard and that one of the forms this should take is an advisory body to Parliament, a body that would be recognised in the Constitution.

What a gift this is what we give you, Galarrwuy Yunupingu has said, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way. The gift we're 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 the 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're only repeating the error of the colonialists and the federationists before us. At a moment when democracy is imperilled around the world, we are being offered the extraordinary possibility of completing our democracy.

But saying these things might be deemed unreasonable or shrill or far-fetched, 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 year old culture - which they are willing to share, which has shaped and continues to shape much of what is best in us as a people - 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 by dividing us.

We need a large and open vision of who we are sustained in truth, not myths that encourage dangerous illusions. I know these are large ideas, but perhaps they are the ideas for these times. None of these things are easy. None would be arrived at quickly. 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 the yearning for the chasm overwhelming us. 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, people who feel, and who think.

Australia is not a fixed entity, a collection of out-dated bigotries and reactionary credos, but rather the invitation to dream. And this country, our country, belongs to its dreamers. And if, after over 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.