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Submission to

The Senate's inquiry into opportunities for strengthening Australia's relations with the Republic of France.

Terms of reference addressed in this submission

Term e. : "Opportunities to build on shared historical and cultural values and promote tourism, with specific reference to Commonwealth War Graves, cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties".

Summary

Australian taxpayers have contributed a vast amount of tax dollars to commemorating Australia's shared military history with France. While culturally and historically important for some Australians, these projects are failing to effectively build people-to-people ties between our two nations. As a public diplomacy activity, Australia is not getting 'bang for its buck' because the type of Australian military history that is currently being presented to the French at Australian battlefield sites in France fails to capture the interest of this French audience.

This submission sets out the limits of DVA's current approach to commemorating military history as a vehicle for promoting cultural exchange, people-to-people ties and tourism amongst French people. Instead it advocates for the development of a new narrative of French-Australian history, developed by applying best practice historical techniques, including a process of shared history (*Histoire partagée*). It suggests that further taxpayer funds would be better directed to promoting other aspects of Australian cultural and historical life in order to deliver on the objective of fostering deeper interpersonal links.

Submitted by

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Context

Since the exhumation of Australia's Unknown Soldier at Villers-Bretonneux, France, in 1993, Australian Government agencies have 'rediscovered' Australian war sites on the former Western Front and engaged in the promotion of visits to these sites. Starting with the Keating Government and continuing with the Howard Government, Australia's commemorative presence on the Western Front has considerably increased, culminating with the opening of the John Monash Centre in 2018.¹ Between 2008 and 2018 in particular, Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries in France and projects associated with them (museums, memorials, remembrance trails, etc.) have been a strong focus for the Australian Government, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and the Office of Australian War Graves (OAWG).

¹ Romain Fathi, "La Grande Guerre de l'identité nationale : mémoire, politique et politiques mémorielles en Australie des années 1980 à nos jours", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 2015/2 (n° 258), p. 71-90.

While the vast majority of French people are unaware of Australia's participation to the First World War² – a participation that represented about 0.6% of all combatants who took part in the conflict – a small and select group of French villages on the former Western Front have seized the opportunity to develop relationships with Australian authorities in order to increase “*le tourisme de mémoire*”: a branch of French tourism dedicated to memory and commemoration.³ In Northern France, this is widespread, as a great number of towns and villages have been proactive in securing funding from the former Dominions of the British Empire whose troops fought in France during WWI (and WWII in some cases), and many of these French towns have developed a special relationship with former foes and allies alike, including through formal twinning commemorative arrangements. As the world's most visited country, France has a very active network of agencies for the promotion of tourism and for the development of the infrastructure necessary to facilitate it.⁴

Problems

Within this context, the Australian Government, through DVA and the OAWG, has spent millions of dollars of Australian taxpayer funds to develop commemorative sites in northern France, in particular between 2013 and 2018.⁵ A conservative estimate would be \$120 000 000 AUD, a disproportionate amount to that spent by Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland, Germany, and Great Britain.⁶ This is consistent with Australia's overall spending for the commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War: the largest in the world per taxpayer.⁷ Certainly, in Northern France, Australia has been one of the largest contributors to WWI commemorations. It is worth noting that the WWI focus in Australia's relationship with France has been so strong that the few French villages that are connected to the Anzac narrative have a concentration of Order of Australia recipients that is unmatched by other French cities in proportion to their population.⁸

So, has this money been well spent? Has it developed people-to-people French-Australian relations? As a historian, my answer is: no, not really.

First, the type of history and engagement proposed on Australian war graves sites in France speaks primarily to the Australian audience, with little to no contextualization for the French audience that is supposedly targeted. Overall, these Australian sites are visited by Australians, and fail to capture large scale French interest.⁹

Often, the newest developments (those between 2013 and 2018) have underperformed with regard to expected visitation rates. For instance, in Report 6/2015 of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works pertaining to the John Monash Centre, DVA projected a visitation rate of 110 000 visitors a year.¹⁰ During the first year of its opening, at the height of the commemorative wave, only

² Romain Fathi, *Our Corner of the Somme. Australia at Villers-Bretonneux*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 1-10; Romain Fathi, “Do the French care about Anzac?”, *The Conversation*, 12 April 2019.

³ “Centenaire de la Grande Guerre Point sur l'étude de mesure des retombées économiques”, *Mission du Centenaire*, Paris, March 2019.

⁴ “Le tourisme en France : les chiffres clés du secteur”, *Le portail de l'Économie, des Finances, de l'Action et des Comptes publics*, 27 September 2017. See also: <https://www.economie.gouv.fr/cedef/statistiques-officielles-tourisme>.

⁵ “Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front”, Department of Veterans' Affairs' website.

⁶ Romain Fathi, « Le prosélytisme mémoriel australien dans la Somme et le nouveau Centre Sir John Monash », *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire*, 2019/3 (N° 143), p. 129-147.

⁷ David Stephens, “Total Australian spending on World War I centenary: an aide memoire for the curious”, *Honest History*, 19 February 2019; Romain Fathi, “Is Australia spending too much on the ‘Anzac centenary’? A comparison with France”, *Honest History*, 14 April 2016; Letter from The Honourable Dan Tehan MP to David Stephen, 17 June 2017.

⁸ Romain Fathi, *Our Corner of the Somme*, 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰ [Report 6/2015 of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works pertaining to the John Monash Centre](#), 7.

half that number – about 54 000 – visited the Centre, 65% of whom were Australian visitors, and only about 35% were French.¹¹ Similarly, French attendance to Australian commemorative events (such as the Anzac Day Dawn Service at Villers-Bretonneux) has been rather low (a few hundreds), with limited engagement besides French officials who are required to attend, and few members of the local population.¹² In 2018, it was reported that the Australian Embassy in Paris had difficulties finding enough French people to fill up the seats allocated to them at the ceremony.¹³

Secondly, DVA has underused the wealth of French historical expertise on the Western Front. French academic historians have been excluded from most DVA projects over the centenary, with the 'historical' narrative being exclusively provided by DVA, as was the case with the Mont Saint-Quentin walking trail and the John Monash Centre. Generally, DVA's historical narrative for such sites is limited – some would say jingoistic – and cannot be understood or contextualized by visitors beyond the Australian public. Indeed, in a country that knows the costs of war as France does, the glorification of national(ist) military history is often poorly received, and is unlikely to attract large crowds. In fact, in some spheres of French society, DVA's approach to the past has been a disservice to Australia and its perception by the French. Worse, some groups in France and local actors in the tourism market felt alienated, as DVA imposed its Australia-centric commemorative narrative on French territory.¹⁴ This also explains the marginal engagement of the French in Australian commemorative activities, as they don't see how the narrative is relevant to them.

Thirdly, it is important to note that even during the Centenary of the First World War, the market for Second World War tourism sites in France remained twice as large as that of First World War sites, both in terms of visitors and revenue.¹⁵ Overall, battlefield tourism in France is a small branch of *tourisme de mémoire*, itself a small segment of the larger tourism industry. In other words, when it comes to war sites, French people focus on Normandy for WWII and Verdun and its wider region for WWI. This means that if Australian authorities truly want to engage segments of the French population in discovering Australian life and culture, they are targeting the wrong section of the cultural/tourism French market.

Fourthly, and in a similar vein, while the French have a strong appetite for cultural activities and history, military history is a niche market, not one that encourages the large-scale forging of cultural ties between our peoples. While it may be convenient at State level (flags, anthems, opportunities for statements and photographs), it does not contribute to the proper forging of people-to-people ties on a large scale.

Nonetheless, despite very limited engagement from their citizens, the French authorities have been very proactive in enabling Australia's commemorative agenda. It remains a source of revenue for the tourism industry (this revenue mostly comes from Australian visitors), and acts as a facilitator for commemorative diplomacy: it has given French diplomacy an edge, for instance, in the very competitive sector of the Australian defense market. Many French people, including diplomats, would admit never having heard about the Anzacs prior to working with Australians, but they consider this historical connection as a useful leverage with which to do business once they become aware of it.

¹¹ Noémie Philippot, "54 000 visiteurs pour la première année du centre Sir John Monash à Villers-Bretonneux", [France Bleu](#), 16/04/2019 ; "Le premier bilan du Centre Sir John Monash à Villers-Bretonneux", [Le Courrier Picard](#), 23/04/2019.

¹² Romain Fathi, "'A piece of Australia in France': Australian authorities and the commemoration of Anzac Day at Villers-Bretonneux in the last decade", in *Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration: Mobilizing the Past in Europe, Australia and New Zealand*, ed. S. Sumartojo and B. Wellings, Peter Lang, Bern, 2014.

¹³ Conversation between the author and staff at the French-Australian Museum of Villers-Bretonneux, Victoria School, January 2018.

¹⁴ Multiple conversations between the author with several local museum and association representatives at Villers-Bretonneux and Péronne between 2013 and 2019.

¹⁵ Matthieu Wyckaert, "La fréquentation touristique liée au tourisme de mémoire : près de 12 millions de visites en 2017", *Observatoire économique de la Défense* n° 115 (2018) : 1-6.

If France and Australia want to develop a long lasting and large-scale positive relationship, that brings everyday French and Australian people together, there is a need to move beyond this economically-founded, and at times cynical, war commemoration diplomacy.

Suggestions

Engage in *Histoire partagée*. *Histoire partagée*, or 'shared history', is an historiographical concept whereby the history that is written is the product of several parties that work together to write their common narrative of the past. It acknowledges different points of view through a conversational process that enriches history and leads to a better mutual understanding. By better incorporating French perspectives into Australian-funded commemorative activities, Australia can better engage French audiences. But in practical terms, what does this mean, and how would it contrast with current practice?

1. To work with academic historians and community members in constructing historical narratives

In War Graves-related projects, DVA ought to work with French and Australian academic historians selected by their peers, as well as community members, to establish a joint historical narrative. As previously mentioned, DVA has purposefully excluded French academic historians from many of its projects, at Mont Saint-Quentin for example, but also in the construction of the John Monash Centre. The French participation at Second Villers-Bretonneux (April 1918) alongside Australian and British troops is not even discussed, and the Centre is aggressively Australian in a context where nearby French, Belgium, British, German and Canadian museums and memorials engage in a transnational shared history. Australia's way of dealing with its war graves on the former Western Front stands out, but not for the best reasons. Top-down narratives are a thing of the past and visitors and community members are now encouraged to be co-creators of their experience. Between 2013 and 2018, DVA hired in-house historians, imposed the themes that would be covered in on-site displays, and only selected the historical evidence that fitted its own restricted view of Anzac.

2. To accept the independence of historians

At the John Monash Centre, stories that DVA did not like – despite being historically accurate – were not displayed. In a liberal democracy such as Australia, selective history raises concerns. This has been evidenced by respected academic historians from Monash University who were progressively forced to abandon working with DVA on the writing of a historical narrative for the John Monash Centre, as they could not work in accordance with the methodological and ethical requirements of their professions.¹⁶ As a result of having a historical narrative that is curated by DVA and not WWI experts, the John Monash Centre displays an incomplete, one-sided historical narrative of Australia's engagement on the Western Front, attracting half the visitors DVA expected due to its one-dimensional nature.

¹⁶ Bruce Scates, "Colonising the commemorative landscape. The Villers-Bretonneux Project and Australian interventions on the Western Front », in: Becker, Annette / Tison, Stéphane (eds.): *Un siècle de sites funéraires de la Grande Guerre*, Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2018, 135-142 ; Romain Fathi, "Look at me! Look at me!" The Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux: a Frenchman's reflection on his visit', *Honest History*, 12 March 2019

3. To accept local input

At Villers-Bretonneux, some members of the long-established local French-Australian Association felt rejected, as they were not asked to contribute to the historical narrative presented at the Monash Centre. It is not good practice to ignore the perspectives of local residents. And mere consultation with locals is not enough: their input ought to manifest in commemorative projects, thus forging this shared history and a relationship that both parties are satisfied with. Others also felt that opening yet another Australian museum at Villers-Bretonneux was not necessary given that one already existed at Victoria School, in town.

4. To move beyond the War Graves and military history

The type of military history discussed in this submission thus far, that which is currently emphasised by Australian authorities on the French market, is an aspect of Australian culture that most French people are unaware of and toward which they have demonstrated very limited interest. Australian fauna and flora, Australian art, cinema and culture, on the other hand, are aspects of Australian life that the French are interested in. Like many around the world, the French are also interested in the stories and culture of Indigenous Australians. Rich collaborations between French institutions and Indigenous Australians have occurred for several decades now and these should continue to be encouraged.

Therefore, if the Australian Government is to commit funding to develop a shared sense of history with France and develop people-to-people ties, my principal suggestion is that it is not at WWI sites that its institutions should be looking, but rather the myriad of other aspects of French-Australian history. This includes, but is not limited to, navigators, explorers, botanists, Australian francophiles, etc. The history of France and the French in Australia is rich, as is the history of Australia and Australians in France. Many aspects of such histories have the capacity to bring us closer together and will do so much better than a focus on war commemoration, in particular as Australians and French people have a radically different cultural memory of the Great War. The agenda and funding capacity of one government agency (DVA) should thus not be the dominant mode of engaging with French people on their territory, and the cultural agenda of French-Australian relations should not be monopolised by Australian WWI commemorative projects. Hundreds of thousands of Australians go to France every year and the vast majority *do not* visit the battlefields. As for the French visiting Australia, the majority do not make it to the Australian War Memorial and Canberra. Sydney, Melbourne, and Queensland's pristine beaches are at the top of their travel list. In other words, a rich relationship can only flourish through a diversity of investments and from the bottom up, with both governments supporting a wide array of cultural projects across the many regions of each other's countries.

5. Language

Significant opportunities to build on shared historical and cultural values and promote tourism, cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties between France and Australia already exist. Australia's working holiday visa has been an outstanding tool to expose more French people to Australian life and culture. This Australian policy has succeeded in attracting more young French people to Australia than ever before. But there remains more to be done.

While proficiency in English has increased in France, language – as it is embedded in culture – still represents an enormous barrier between French and Australian peoples. Even in the instance of the War Graves, relationships with Canada have been much closer and mutually beneficial because of

Canada's use of French as an official language. Australian authorities need to heavily invest in French language courses if they want to develop a long lasting and respectful relationship with the French (English is already compulsory in French high schools). They also need to understand French expectations when visiting tourist sites both in France and in Australia. For instance, it is surprising to note the absence of French brochures and translations at many Australian cultural institutions. For those who are not fluent in English, this renders forging any meaningful connection with Australian culture very difficult.

Conclusions

Australia's funding of First World War commemorative projects in France has attracted many Australian visitors to the Western Front and Australian battlefield sites. It remains an important historical record of Australia's participation in the Great War, and these commemorative sites therefore retain inherent value for some Australians. If the assessment is measuring how many Australians visited the Western Front in the last 30 years, then the policy was mostly successful. It is worth bearing in mind though that a large majority of Australians who visit France do not visit these sites. By French standards, however, Australian battlefield sites in France attracted a very limited number of French visitors, mostly local inhabitants already aware of Australia's connection to France.

If the goal is to promote cultural exchanges, further funding of projects on Australian battlesites in France won't serve to further deepen the people-to-people links between our two nations. While they have objectively contributed to this over time, this contribution has been expensive in relation to the number of French people involved, and the same groups of French people have been exposed to it over time: that is the people of Villers-Bretonneux, Bullecourt, Fromelles, Pozières, le Hamel, Sailly-le-Sec, Mont Saint-Quentin and other Northern France towns and villages the majority of French people don't know about (there are over 35 000 cities and towns in France). Funding would be better spent on other projects in other areas of France where Australia is lesser known. Telling the same stories to the same group of people has limitations.

Fortunately, Australia has a significant potential to engage French people on cultural and touristic matters beyond the war graves. Australia's landscapes and natural environment greatly appeal to the French, and Australia will find a very receptive audience in France for cultural projects pertaining to Australian culture, society and arts, with a strong interest in Indigenous Australians. Where *Histoire partagée* cannot be developed when there is an absence of past historical connection, Australia should market what makes it distinctive and relevant today. If further funding is committed by the Australian Government to the creation of people-to-people ties, it would be best to direct it to DFAT rather than DVA. While DVA offers Australian veterans one of the most comprehensive support scheme in the world, it has lacked intercultural skills necessary to engage the French. DFAT, However, has a strong track record of engaging French people across France through a wide array of projects that represent both France and Australia's diversity.

Governments possess considerable powers to kick-start positive, mutually beneficial and long-lasting relationships with one another. Already, significant progress has been made since the first visit of a French President, President Hollande, to Australia in 2014, and the subsequent visit of President Macron, but much potential remains for further positive developments. It is my belief that the suggestions outlined above will enable this.

NB: Evidence documenting any aspect of this submission can be submitted on request. Historians work with evidence and primary sources, and I am ready to share these if required. I wish the Committee every success in developing a thriving relationship between Australia and France, in as many areas and as many locations as possible.