

THE BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA — CENTENARY

Statement

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [10.11 pm]: I rise to make the centenary anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba. One hundred years ago today, men of the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments of the Australian Imperial Force launched a surprise attack and charged across six kilometres of open ground at the lines of unwired Turkish trenches. After surviving the onset of defensive fire and reaching the enemy lines at a gallop, Australian troopers of the 4th Light Horse Regiment wielded bayonets as swords, engaged in hand-to-hand combat and captured many Ottoman infantry prisoners. The men of the 12th Light House Regiment rode on towards the town of Beersheba itself, capturing it and securing access to vital water supplies. The charge at Beersheba is recounted as among the last great militarily successful cavalry charges of history. The endeavour of Australian mounted infantry that day marked the passing of an age of military tactics and represented in both practical and symbolic ways the end of an era and the commencement of a new age.

This morning, I represented the Leader of the Opposition and the State Parliamentary Liberal Party at a commemorative service for this battle. I was joined by the Premier, who spoke meaningfully about the distinctive nature of the Sinai–Palestine campaign as compared to the static quagmire of battles on the Western Front. This campaign was marked by rapidity, motion and manoeuvre. Warily, advisedly and comparatively the desert campaign was romantic. It had cinematic moments of dash and valour but it was war all the same and carried for its protagonists the very same fatal consequences. In the Australian public consciousness the names of places such as Gallipoli, Ypres, Kokoda, Tobruk, Sandakan, and Long Tan resonate strongly and meaningfully. Despite being committed to film on two occasions, my view is that the actions at Beersheba a century ago have been largely consigned to the foggy recesses of our national memory. This is a matter of some regret. The Battle of Beersheba was a signal tactical victory, but it was also of immense operational and political consequence for it allowed the British to recapture Gaza, and with the collapse of the retreating Ottoman lines, the eventual liberation of Jerusalem. The Balfour Declaration, which followed very soon after, and the establishment of the Palestine Mandate would pave the way, decades later, in the wake of an even more mechanistic and gruesome conflict, for the establishment of the state of Israel. It was an honour to be joined by members of the Friends of Israel today and Perth’s Jewish community at the Flame of Remembrance to commemorate this battle and to join them later for a service at the Jewish War Memorial. I am grateful too for the address given by Rabbi Freilich on Beersheba’s biblical foundation, as the site upon which Abraham and Abimelech settled differences concerning a well and made an oath. The etymology of Beersheba means “well of the seven”, perhaps referring to seven lambs offered as part of the reconciliation, or to “well of the oath”. Such scholarly observations are always open to disputation, but the emphasis on the concept of oath-making and covenant-sharing is apt and unifying for it reminds us of our obligations to humanity’s higher callings—to the service of freedom, liberty, justice and decency—to which each of the casualties we honour on this day gave during the bloom of their youth as the last full measure of their devotion.

It also cannot pass without notice that the Battle of Beersheba in the context of the Sinai–Palestine campaign precipitated the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. But from that empire of centuries standing arose many new nations, among them the Republic of Turkey. If there is another nation that has assisted in the forging of the modern Australian identity through action on the battlefield, it is Turkey. Remarks often attributed to the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, speak to this shared experience in a consolation to the grieving —

You, the mothers who sent their sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.

We normally have call to reflect on these words on Anzac Day. They were framed in the context of the Gallipoli campaign—the campaign that still anchors the focus of our reflection, gratitude and grief for the exertions and sacrifice of Australian service personnel from that moment onward. But I think those words also offer some consolation to those who grieved for the 31 Australians who were killed at Beersheba. It is to their memory and that of their wounded comrades I make this small contribution tonight and impart these humble words. Lest we forget.