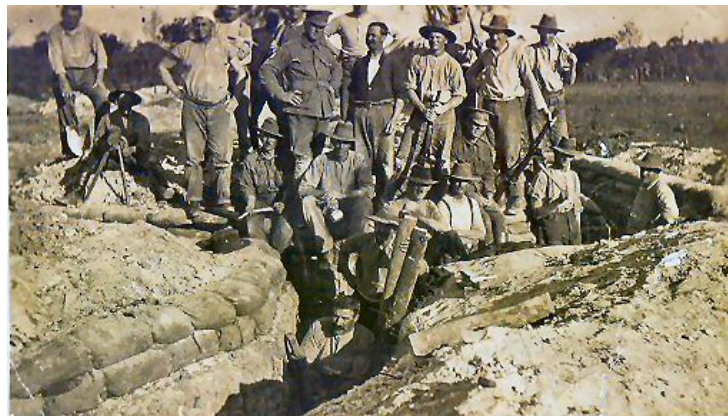




Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Open Letter To The Prime Minister



POSTCARD: Australian Engineers—Possibly training looking at the nonchalant pose being adopted.

The Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP
Federal Member for Griffith & Prime Minister of Australia,
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25-May-2008

Dear Prime Minister,

Members of the Fromelles Discussion Group refer you to the remarks by Leigh Dayton in 'Lesson in probe for our lost warriors', which appeared on the internet as a blog posted by The Australian on the 23rd April, 2008. Impassioned by the "tale of two Australian shipwrecks, one literal and one metaphorical", Dayton contrasts the openness surrounding the search for and discovery of the Royal Australian Navy light cruiser HMAS Sydney which was sunk in 1941 and the lack of transparency and official resolution in relation to Pheasant Wood.

Drawing public attention to the critical difference in the handling of HMAS Sydney and the burial pits at Fromelles, Dayton raises several important issues which need to be addressed. Besides questioning whether there is any real evidence to support the contention there are Australian and British war dead at Pheasant Wood, Dayton adopts a critical position in relation to the appointment of Glasgow University's Tony Pollard by suggesting, "The wrong technology and the wrong expedition leader" has been chosen by the Australian Government. Indeed in keeping with the background promulgated by the Fromelles Discussion Group since its inception, Dayton compares the two cases and laments the failure of the Australian Government to communicate information about Fromelles, particularly since the frightful death toll indisputably marks this event as a national tragedy.

Though sympathetic about the workload being carried by the Australian Government, the army and its experts in relation to such issues, Dayton is concerned about Fromelles and the way decisions are being made in isolation at the official level. Consequently the Fromelles Discussion Group would request you redress the lack of consultation and publicly explain why Pollard was chosen to examine this significant Great War battlefield site since he has no experience with mass graves. Likewise the Group would be grateful if you would disclose all pertinent information relating to the tendering process which enabled Pollard to be selected, as well as the qualifications and training of his team.

Since questions have already been raised about Tony Pollard's credentials and lack of mass grave expertise, the Fromelles Discussion Group would also appreciate the Federal Government releasing the report compiled as a result of the initial geophysical survey. This is particularly important now that Dayton has suggested media enquiries about Pheasant Wood are not welcomed by the newly-elected Government, and claims "Pollard did not use ground penetrating radar to investigate the pits, as specified by the then minister Bruce Bilson."

Is this the reason for the apparent lack of information over Fromelles and why the public is not allowed to know what investigative techniques are supposedly being employed at the site? From what Dayton says in his Blog, the approach being adopted by the Pollard team is so deficient that it appears, "he's been given ROAM's proposal, including Wright's methodology." Can you as the Prime Minister of Australia either confirm or deny this or comment upon Dayton's statement that Pollard "employed a ground phase reader, an instrument that's great for finding buttons and bullets a few centimetres deep but is incapable of 'seeing' to the bottom of a deep pit"? Because if this was the case then the Australian public has a right to query the government and the manner with which it hires such experts, as well as the competency of the team itself and wholeheartedly and collectively condemn bureaucratic assurances the GUARD team were selected because they were best qualified to undertake the archaeological work involved.

It is the considered view of the Fromelles Discussion Group that these and other questions that we have submitted to the Rudd Government should be answered and not ignored. Questions about the methodologies being adopted during the trial dig, questions which have been raised about world's best practice in forensic archaeology, questions about maintaining the integrity of the site and any remains that might be found and questions about the types of technology being deployed during this and any subsequent dig, should all be taken on board to ensure the public is kept fully informed of developments and has the opportunity to contribute to the debate over what should be happening. This would give descendants and relatives the chance to participate in the ongoing process of recovery and feel part of the project, particularly in deciding how to correctly memorialise the missing and adequately commemorate their loved ones should this be necessary.

Can you as Prime Minister verify Dayton's suggestion that the Australian Army is sending University of Sydney forensic archaeologist Denise Donlon to assist with the trial dig? Moreover, that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (or at least the nations that are affiliated with it) are now permitting 60 Minutes and the BBC to attend the trial dig?

How does this sit with assertions promulgated by representatives of the Army History Unit at a recent presentation at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, Victoria, that there would be no further searching for war dead in Belgium and France, or photographs of any remains permitted at Pheasant Wood? Does the Australian Government accept Tim Sutherland's suggestion that sites such as Fromelles should be comprehensively and fully documented to ensure the survival of all physical and artefactual evidence? Is it the intention of the Australian Government to insist on the presence of professionally trained osteologists during the trial dig and to have this grave site preserved for its intrinsic heritage value?

Just why is this such a complicated issue for the Australian Government? Equally importantly, the Fromelles Discussion Group would like to know what Tony Pollard is being remunerated for the trial dig which should by now be well underway in northern France, especially since he needs to be provided methodologies which accompanied the proposals of other interested parties like ROAM. In view of Pollard's previous report (which appears to have been copyrighted by his group), the public should also be told what other documentation is being prepared and provided to the Commonwealth Government during this the trial dig.

Does the Federal Government intend to distribute this original report to the media, or will it and any new findings continue to be withheld from the public who are being expected to fund what Dayton has described as Pollard being paid to "swot up on forensic archaeology"?

Already concerned about the inadequacy of any response to the issues raised by us and the commentary posted by Dayton, the Fromelles Discussion Group would request you brief the Australian community as to what is actually happening at Fromelles. Has Tim Sutherland or any of the other international experts or specialists who condemned the initial report compiled by GUARD been invited to participate in or observe the current dig? Why have we not heard anything as the trial dig was meant to start in the first week in May?

Lastly, why was the Director, Office of Australian War Graves given the task of responding to a communication from one of our members to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, which was subsequently referred to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs without him being properly briefed about the Fromelles Discussion Group and the material it has been forwarding to the Federal Labor Government and posting on the publicly accessible and interlinked pages of the world wide web?

Though the communication from Major General J. P. Stevens, AO (Retd) about Australia's treaty obligations and current policy with respect to the exhumation, transfer and burial of bodies found on WWI battlefields was greatly appreciated by the group, members are still at a loss as to understand why you as Prime Minister and other elected officials, who regularly receive the material we publish, do not answer our enquiries directly and immediately as one would expect as a matter of courtesy.

We await your reply.

Members of the Fromelles Discussion Group