



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

**Morant, Lieutenant Harry 'Breaker', Handcock,
Lieutenant Peter, Witton, Lieutenant George**

SPEECH

Monday, 12 February 2018

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Monday, 12 February 2018 Page 31 Questioner Speaker Danby, Michael, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (10:29): I commend the member for Wright and the member for Eden-Monaro for their remarks. The injustice suffered by Harry 'Breaker' Morant is something that is in the Australian imagination. I commend the members of his family that are here in the gallery, and particularly Jim Unkles, for his long campaign for justice on their behalf. This is not an issue, as the member for Eden-Monaro pointed out, of whether some wrong act was committed; it's an issue of whether Australian servicemen serving in the Boer War were treated differently to British troops fighting in the same conflict. It's not just clear from the legend of the film but from all of the research that has been done since that that was the case.

I really think the member for Eden-Monaro made a great point: because of this great injustice, perhaps Australian troops were not executed during World War I, which came so soon afterwards. That's a very important step. It was a step that Australia took in seeing that we were more independent of Britain—not that we want to disassociate ourselves from the great Westminster system or anything like that, but there were circumstances where the imperial interests of Great Britain, prior to the First World War, were trying to be friendly with the German kaiser. Lord Kitchener felt, therefore, that the Australian colonials could be treated differently to British troops. These kinds of incidents happened after, as the member for Eden-Monaro said—and I'm sure the member for Wright did too—the mutilation of members of the Bushveldt Carbineers by the Boers. It was a very vicious conflict. Breaker Morant and his associates were treated differently to British troops. I think the idea of Lord Kitchener, in making himself absent from any ability to appeal the court martial, was that this would appease the Germans. After all, a German minister had been killed in that conflict. If one looks at even the geostrategic aims of what was attempted to be achieved, no appeasement was raised with Germany. The kaiser was determined to have his Great War; he was determined to show that Germany was the great power in Europe. And such foolish efforts by Lord Kitchener to appease, in anticipation, the Germans by executing colonials was unethical and a mistaken idea.

Jim Unkles, in his wonderful piece recently in *The Australian*, explained that this is a debate not about the execution of prisoners during the Boer War but about whether they were denied justice. He details the scandalous point that Lord Kitchener left Pretoria and told his staff he was uncontactable, thereby denying the Australians their legal right to appeal to King Edward and seek the assistance of the Australian government. That was a calculated perversion of the course of justice. He may have been told to do that by higher-ups in the British government, but, whatever it was, it was an example of treating Australians differently. I think this country has developed independently since then. That was a key point in the breaking of the commonality between Australia and Britain. If one looks at *The Bulletin* or any of the magazines that were published in all of the intervening years, they were very strongly aware of this injustice, and it sort of helped develop the independent Australian psyche that we have now, particularly when we're involved in military conflict. It's commendable that we continue to raise this with the British. I don't think any justice will be done until the capital punishment suffered by those two poor men is overturned.

The **SPEAKER**: The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting. At a personal level, I welcome the descendants of the Morant, Handcock and Witton families to the gallery today and also James Unkles and his wife. Jim is a very passionate and dedicated member of my constituency and I want to welcome him here today.