

My contribution to the debate on the Centenary of the Armistice, 7 November 2018

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A hundred years ago on Sunday, a deafening silence broke out over the vast battlefields of Europe. Then, as now, there must have been very mixed emotions.

There would have been that great sense of loss and remorse that so many people had been slaughtered, and so many people maimed and incapacitated. I guess that for those in the trenches there was apprehension. Was this for real? Could they trust the enemy? Would this truce hold? Could they stumble out of those muddy dungeons that had been their safe houses over all those long weeks and months of toil into a more open and free world where they could behave more normally? But they were, and we are, also permitted some joy that at last this murderous, bestial war was over. After four years of mass industrial slaughter, with millions of individual tragedies between the men and the families of the different combative nations, at last the slaughter was over. There was a chance to build something better.

When I lay a wreath in the morning in Burghfield and in the afternoon in Wokingham, I will be very conscious of two things. I will be conscious that there are war memorials in every other village and town in my constituency that time does not permit me to visit that day. As I look up at those lists of names on those two war memorials, I will be very conscious of how long those lists are and of how many brothers are together on the same list, with a double or treble tragedy for the family.

That scale of loss is difficult to comprehend and to wrestle with.

It reminds me of my two grandfathers. As is the case with most of us, our great grandfathers or our grandfathers were the survivors. They were young men who fought as young men and then tried to build a more normal life when they got back from the trenches. They had not had time to have girlfriends and to marry and produce children before they went off to war. My two grandfathers, like many others, went at the earliest possible opportunity, or may even have misled those involved about their age so keen were they to volunteer. Both fought on the western front.

One was badly injured, but, fortunately, recovered. I wanted to know from them, as a boy and as a teenager, more about these terrible events. Like many of their generation who had been through the war, they did not really want to share it with us. It was obviously so awful. They did not seek my praise and they did not seek my sympathy. They wanted to shield me from it. I wanted to know more about it, but I think that they took that view because it was so awful.

We have heard many moving remarks today, particularly about those who died,

but let us think about those who survived. Let us think about what it must have been like to have four years of no normal life—as someone who was 17, 18, 19, 20 or whatever they were—where they had no normal social life and no normal family life apart from very rushed periods of leave, when they could not pursue their normal sports and leisure pursuits because space would not allow it, when they had no privacy, and when they had very repetitious food. The dreadful things they fought are obvious—the shells, the bombs, the rifle bullets, the snipers and the machine guns.

You can just about imagine how awful it must have been to have that fear that you were going to be asked to advance on barbed wire and machine guns, knowing that you had very little chance of surviving, but what about the boredom? What about the relentless discipline and the inability to know how to fill the time while you were worrying about what was going to happen next? All of those things must have been dreadful.

So this is what I think we need to do. We owe it to them, to all those who directed the war, and to all those in this Parliament who sent our army to war—time does not permit this afternoon—to have a proper analysis and discussion about how we can do better in future. I am no pacifist. I think we have to arm ourselves well to protect ourselves and to preserve the peace.

We have fought too many wars and, too often, we sent our army into wars where they had limited chances of winning. We did not have a diplomatic and political strategy to follow the war. There is no use in winning a war, unless we win the peace as well. We know that the sequel to the first world war is the second world war—the tragedy that it all had to be done again on an even vaster scale with even bigger munitions and more terrifying bombs, eventually ending with the explosion of two atomic bombs to bring it to a very sad conclusion.

We need to ask ourselves how we can make sure that diplomacy and politics does not let people down so much again. How was it part of our strategy that, twice, this Parliament sent small highly professional British armies on to the continent to fight a war against a far bigger, better armed foe when they had no chance of winning because they had too little resource, the wrong weapons and the wrong tactics. In the first world war, it took four years to recruit a mighty citizens' army, to invent a lot of new weapons and to develop new tactics during the war. We were sadly unprepared. We asked them to do too much and it is amazing what they did.