



THE GREAT DEBATE: CONSCRIPTION AND NATIONAL SERVICE 1912-1972



MILITARY HISTORY AND
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
THE POMPEY ELLIOT MEMORIAL HALL,
CAMBERWELL RSL BY MILITARY HISTORY AND
HERITAGE, VICTORIA.

30 MAY 2015

Proudly supported by:



Billy Hughes and the Politics of Conscription 1916-17

Dr Andrew Kilsby

Most if not all of us here today know about the two conscription referendums which took place in 1916 and 1917 respectively. We've heard that William Morris Hughes or 'Billy' Hughes, as he was better known, was the prime advocate for these two referendums and that Bishop and later Archbishop Daniel Mannix, the chief opponent, at least in Victoria. We're aware that the two referendums were narrowly defeated despite an equally narrow 'yes' vote by the 1st AIF.

Against this broad canvas much more detail of how and why these two referendums became hugely divisive within Australian society has been progressively revealed by historians. Researchers have delved into newspapers, correspondence between soldiers and families at home, the politics of what stood as the class and religious divisions of 1916 and 1917 and the attitudes towards the referendums by different sectors of society - all of this against a growing awareness of the impact of the war upon Australian society as a whole, including within families.

Voting in the conscription referendums was not compulsory. Nor did voting results divide along classic religious or political lines across the entire country despite what Labor Party history might want us to believe today. But divisive the referendums certainly were. The war had a terrible impact on a young Australia. The conscription debate and referendums almost certainly acted as a lightning rod for all of the emotions of patriotism and the strong sense of Empire vs. the angst and despair that many were already feeling from the terrible casualties at the front.

Born in 1862, Billy Hughes died in 1952 as one of the most controversial figures and certainly colourful figures of Australian public life. A formidable orator, described as a tiny, wiry man, with a raspy voice and an increasingly wizened face, he was called "Little Digger" by soldiers, a "visceral Imperialist" by writer Carl Bridge - and "Rat" by the Labor Party, which his first conscription referendum split asunder in 1916.

Hughes became Attorney-General in the Labor government of Andrew Fisher – who opposed conscription - following the 1914 elections. When Fisher resigned after a fall out with

Hughes in October 1915, Hughes succeeded him as Prime Minister. Fisher went on to London as Australia's High Commissioner instead.

Hughes was strongly committed to the war and he was an ardent supporter of the AIF and its role in building the narrative that Australia had come of age through its martial endeavour at Gallipoli and thereafter. Fisher had famously promised that 'Australia would help and defend the Mother Country to its last man and its last shilling' but after the election did not urge recruitment. Yet Hughes carried forth the war beacon with fervour, even though ten years earlier he had stated that 'Australia needed no armies because it was 10,000 miles from danger.' And just 12 months before he had stated 'In no circumstances would I agree to send men out of this country to fight against their will.'

Hughes travelled to England in early 1916 and was away from Australia for more than six months. While there he advocated greater economic pressure on Germany – his speeches were well received across the country and garnered wide publicity. Hughes was lionised - he was the 'Man of the Hour', the 'Strong Man of Australia'. Hughes also visited the front, where he met Australian troops on the eve of the battles to come at Pozières, [Mouquet Farm](#) and [Fromelles](#).

The 5th Australian Division alone had been shattered in one night at Fromelles and took several months to recover before returning to the trenches. The AIF lost almost 28,000 in actions on the [Somme](#) in July and August; only 7,000 Australians were available in Great Britain to replace them. As these enormous casualty lists from the first battles at the Somme gradually became public in Australia however, volunteers enlisting to replace those losses slowed steadily. But the AIF needed around 20,000 men at once and 16,500 in the next three months to rebuild the divisions to full strength.

There was sustained British pressure on the Australian Government to ensure that Australia's divisions were not depleted: in 1916 it was argued that Australia needed to provide reinforcements of 5500 men per month to maintain its forces overseas at operational level. The figures were seen by some as a gross exaggeration. Estimates by others, including those commanding the Australian divisions at the front, were much lower but many believed that conscription was the best way to replace the losses quickly.

Hughes had returned to Australia in July 1916 with a strong desire to support the troops, and, in view of the high casualties on the Somme and falling enlistments, he decided to introduce

conscription. Chambers of commerce, employer organisations, bishops, teachers, judges, newspaper editors all joined in the cry for conscription.

In fact, the government already had legal powers sufficient to introduce overseas conscription. Hughes was however, unwilling to confront a Labor majority hostile to him in the Senate. Believing that a majority of the people would support him if the issues were fully explained, and wanting to avoid a public Party fight, Hughes decided a referendum would provide symbolic sanction for the move - although supporters of conscription called him a coward for doing so, rather than just using his power to go ahead.

In the words of Horne, Hughes committed himself to the cause of conscription with the 'zealous fixedness of a charging rhinoceros.' Hughes never thought that he would lose the referendum, or considered the social and political consequences of having a large minority against it if he did.

Conscription had been in place since the 1910 Defence Act, but only in the defence of the nation. As early as September 1914 the Universal Service League had been set up to advocate conscription, without success. Hughes was now seeking via a referendum to change the wording in the Act to include "overseas". The one question asked:

Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this War, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?

Hughes was so confident of winning he actually authorised a call-up to begin before the referendum, and some 7,000 men had already entered camp before the referendum date. On the eve of the ballot three ministers, provoked by the ill-judged pre-emptive call up before the vote was known, resigned.

Before the vote it was clear that many were against the idea in any form. Organisation around anti-conscription was quick to form – state Labor parties and branches, trade unions, religious groups, and women such as the Women's Peace Army, formed in 1915. Those against included Labor Party stalwarts like Queensland Premier Thomas Joseph Ryan to journalist John Curtin and newspaper editor E H Coombe, women like Vida Goldstein and the Women's Peace Army, trade unionists like the Industrial Workers of the World and the Trade Union Congress, socialists like Frank Anstey, MP, Catholics and other Christians of conscience.

Hughes opened the 'Yes' campaign on 18 September: voting was on 28 October and conducted under the *Military Service Referendum Act 1916*.

Hughes said:

The people of Australia are about to decide the destiny of their country. They are about to show the world what manner of men and women they are. They must declare that they stand loyally by the Empire and their kinsmen. I ask them to prove in this referendum whether they want to be their own masters, or slaves.

The referendum was narrowly defeated (1,087,557 'Yes' and 1,160,033 'No' and only Victoria, WA, Tasmania and Federal territories voted yes). The result, however, did not deter Hughes, who continued to argue vigorously in favour of conscription. Traditional conservative and middle class electorates tended to vote 'yes', but country electorates tended to vote 'no'. In the aftermath, those who had opposed the referendum were called traitors by the patriotic sectors of society and class lines superficially at least seemed to have determined the vote.

There were 133,813 votes from the 1st AIF of which the 'yes' vote won by a narrow 13,000 votes.

Politics

The first conscription referendum split the Labor Party. A two-thirds majority of the Party, which included [Roman Catholics](#) and [union](#) representatives as well as the Industrialists (Socialists), were bitterly opposed to conscription, especially in the wake of what was regarded by many Irish Australians (most of whom were Roman Catholics) as Britain's excessive response to the [Easter Rising](#) of 1916.

On 15 September 1916 the NSW executive of the Political Labour League (the Labor Party organisation at the time) led by Frank Tudor, expelled Hughes from the Labor Party, after Hughes and 24 others had already walked out to the sound of Hughes's finest political cry 'Let those who think like me, follow me.' Hughes took with him almost all of the Parliamentary talent, leaving behind the Industrialists and Unionists, thus marking the end of the first era in Labor's history.

Hughes, after receiving a vote of no confidence in his leadership by his party, resigned as Prime Minister. However, there were no credible alternative candidates. For this reason, the Governor-General used his reserve power to immediately re-commission Hughes, thus

allowing him to remain as Prime Minister while keeping his promise to resign. Hughes and his followers called themselves the National Labor Party and began laying the groundwork for forming a party that they felt would be both avowedly nationalist as well as socially radical. Hughes concluded a confidence and supply agreement with the opposition Commonwealth Liberal Party to stay in office.

A few months later, the Governor-General persuaded Hughes and Liberal Party leader Joseph Cook (himself a former Labor man) to turn their wartime coalition into a formal party. This was the Nationalist Party of Australia, which was formally launched in February 1917. Although the Liberals were the larger partner in the merger, Hughes emerged as leader, with Cook as his deputy. The presence of a working-class man like Hughes leading what was basically an upper- and middle-class party allowed the Nationalists to convey an image of national unity. At the same time, Hughes became and remains a class traitor in Labor histories – ‘a tinpot dictator who menaced the democracy of the Commonwealth, the unscrupulous and double dyed trickster who had entered the camp of the enemy...who had sold out...’

Hughes called an election for 5 May 1917. The new party won a sweeping victory in both Houses. Cook became Minister for the Navy and later Treasurer. But Hughes’ triumph was hollow. Cut off from his political, social and even geographical roots, expelled by the party and the union which had been such a large part of his life, distrusted by his new supporters, he never regained the authority and confidence of his early days.

In the election campaign Hughes had promised not to reopen the conscription issue unless ‘the tide of battle which flows strongly for the Allies turns against them’. In April 1917 Bullecourt gave Australia another 10,000 casualties; Passchendaele thousands more in September, coming at the time of the widespread strike action in Australia, denounced as ‘tools of the anarchists’ and smashed by Hughes. By November 1917 the stalemate on the Western Front seemed impervious to breakthrough; the Reds had taken over in Russia, the Italian Army had collapsed and Volunteer recruitment continued to lag.

Hughes, under strong political pressure, announced another conscription referendum for 20 December. Britain sought a sixth Australian division for active service. But Australia, said Hughes, only needed 7,000 conscripts a month, not the 16,500 a month called for in the 1916 referendum.

Mannix

Melbourne was one of the great centres of Irish emigration, where the Roman Catholic Church was almost entirely Irish. In Australia at this time, the Irish Catholics were commonly treated with disdain by the English and Scottish majority (who were mostly Anglicans and Presbyterians respectively) and also as potentially disloyal. Bishop Mannix was regarded with suspicion from the start and his militant advocacy on behalf of a separate Roman Catholic school system, in defiance of the general acceptance of a secular school system, made him immediately a figure of controversy.

In 1914 when Mannix denounced the war as ‘just a simple trade war’, he was widely denounced as a [traitor](#). While Mannix opposed the 1916 referendum – he supported the Catholic-dominated anti-conscription faction of the Labor Party - he spoke out more frequently about the [1917](#) referendum. This campaign included a speech before a huge crowd of perhaps 100,000 at the Richmond Racecourse - ‘Conscription is a hateful thing, which is certain to bring evil in its train. I make no apology for putting Australia first and the Empire second’ said Mannix.

The extent to which Mannix influenced the outcome of the vote has been debated widely. In the heat of the second referendum campaign, Hughes described Mannix as ‘a man to whom every German in the country looks... if you follow him you range yourself under the banner of the deadly enemies of Australia.’ Mannix of course was not the only public face against the conscription referendums – they were opposed by a wide range of individuals and organisations as previously described, but he was certainly highly influential.

On the other side of the debate were those who supported conscription, the so-called patriotic class – teachers, churchmen (mostly Presbyterian) – and also newspapers, some trade unions and women from all walks of life. A new supporter of conscription in 1917 was the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League of Australia. Both sides managed huge crowds at rallies for and against the question.

Conducted under the *War Precautions (Military Service Referendum) Regulations 1917* the referendum asked:

Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the Commonwealth Forces overseas?

This time passions rose even higher. There was a degree of violence unusual in Australian politics. Hughes, struck by an egg on the railway station at Warwick, Queensland, established a Commonwealth police force to combat disloyalty in response!

The referendum was defeated with 1,015,159 in favour and 1,181,747 against. Western Australia, Tasmania and Federal territories voted yes.

There were 199,677 votes from the 1st AIF voting yes by a narrow margin of about 10,000.

Outcome

In the words of Michael McKernan:

By the end of 1917 Australians seemed emotionally exhausted. There was constant anxiety about the outcome of the war and the fate of Australia's 'best sons'. There were tensions and anxieties caused by class and religious divisions; there was the overwhelming fear that Australia would never be the same again. Australians had embraced war light-heartedly...by the time the war ended they had experienced bitterness and sorrow to the full.

The defeat of the 1917 conscription referendum left unresolved the problem of maintaining the strength of the AIF in the face of a need for more than 5,000 recruits every month to replace casualties and other wastage. During 1918 the government devised a scheme involving ballots of men who voluntarily submitted their names. If they did so they would be given a *Voluntary Ballot* badge to wear. This was the little-known “Voluntary Ballot Enlistment Scheme”, or VBES.

Under the proposed scheme, a ballot draw was to be carried out every three months in each of the 1,049 Commonwealth electoral subdivisions by committees formed locally for that purpose. Letters and pamphlets encouraging participation were to be posted to every man eligible for service – a number calculated to be 838,121 men between 18 and 44. Cards would then be posted for each to complete and return for use in the drawing of the ballot. At the same time, posters would be displayed throughout the Commonwealth to advertise the scheme and appeal strongly to men eligible to take part.

The draw for the first 100 badges took place in Martin Place in Sydney on 7 October 1918 but it was, in fact, the only draw to be conducted in relation to the ballot scheme. In the event, about 300,000 cards were printed but perhaps not fully distributed in the first instance - the scheme had barely come into operation before it was shut down with the signing of the armistice that ended the First World War on 11 November 1918.

By the end of the war in November 1918, a total of 416,809 men had voluntarily enlisted in the Army, representing 38.7 percent of the white male population aged between 18 and 44. 376,000 were prepared to serve overseas; 308,000 served in a war theatre including over 3000 nurses; about 62,300 died (+/- 400) and about 156,000 were wounded, or taken prisoner.

There is research yet to be done to indicate whether the small Australian economy could have in fact managed to continue to operate effectively if another 100,000 or more of its fit men had been recruited for frontline service late in the war.

Conclusion

This paper does not qualify Hughes as a wartime prime minister or his competence or otherwise as a politician, but history would most likely judge, as Donald Horne did in his biography of Hughes, that Hughes, through his own oratory, managed to turn Australians against Australians and even against the war itself. In doing so he also turned his back on the very Labor movement which had nurtured him and his ambitions.

The conscription referendums were to be his greatest failures. It could even be said that he failed the AIF despite his efforts, although he remained personally popular among the soldiers.

Despite the rejection of his conscription policy, Hughes retained his general popularity, and in December 1919 his government was comfortably re-elected. However, the end of the war saw his popularity wane, and he was defeated in the 1922 election. When he died in 1952, his funeral procession was three kilometres long and 450,000 spectators watched it go by.