

The conscription debate in 1916 history essay



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In 1916 war showed no signs of ending any time soon and the number of soldiers enrolling kept decreasing. Therefore The Australian Prime Minister, William Hughes, visited Britain and France to suggest a solution and that was conscription. Conscription is defined as compulsory enrolment for national service which basically means forcing men to sign up and fight. Many people were against it and many were for it which divided Australia apart.

The poster campaign

An anti-conscription

Poster by the labour party. When conscription was proposed and Australia was divided in half. Many debates were held and a referendum had to be raised. Due to the referendum the opposing parties had to persuade people that voting with them was the right thing to do. Part of their campaigning was the poster campaign. This campaign was basically advertising and telling people what the right thing to do was. The people who were campaigning for the yes vote included things in their poster about how it was the Australian men's duties to help their mother country and that they would be backstabbing the other Australian troops fighting in WW1. The "no" party had posters saying that Australia has already done enough for the war and that conscription would lead to their death. After the weeks of campaigning the votes were finally up and the Australians voted "no" so conscription was not introduced.

The role of women in the debate

During the debate, women formed groups to support the opposing sides. The women's national league, the women's Christian temperance union and the national council of women were main supporters of conscription. These women campaigned for voting for conscription and put pressure on men who are related to them to vote to vote " yes" and to join the war. Some women even sent white feathers to men to represent that they were cowards for not joining the war. Meanwhile some women who have lost some of their loved ones were not supporting conscription because they have realised how bad war can be and what a negative effect on families.

The campaign against conscription

Prior to Hughes proposing conscription there were some groups that were against conscription. The conscription before that time was to train teenagers and young adults for military service. The conscription Hughes proposed was for overseas military service. The groups were also generally anti-war movement and these included:

The industrial workers of the world, an international socialist group

The women's peace army

The society of friends

The Australian peace alliance

The no conscription fellowship

The last two groups were mainly focused against conscription instead of generally against war. The trade unions were against conscription too. This

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was because of their fear that they will be low on workers and will have to start employing females and Asian workers. The railways union also played a big part in helping campaign for anti-conscription. They had thousands of handouts distributed.

Many reasons encouraged people to be against conscription. They include:

Some said that war was itself is bad and conscription would encourage it.

Others say it is unfair to force people against their will

Many were against it for their own sake

The working class will have problems

An anti-conscription

Poster proposing the

Yes vote to be a death ballot. The archbishop also opposed conscription leading to his followers also going against it. And farmers also were against conscription due to their fears of them losing their workers therefore losing their profits.

A poster encouraging men

To enlist to the war

And vote yes for conscription

Campaign for conscription

When Billy Hughes suggested conscription, there were some people who supported it. Reinforced referendums were held and the supporters of conscription were campaigning like the anti-conscription supporters were. The bulletin which was the most famous newspaper at that time supported conscription and therefore played a big part in the campaign. Other organisations that supported conscription were:

Sydney and Melbourne universities

Protestant church leaders and businessmen

Alfred Deakin the former PM of Australia.

The women's national league

the women's Christian temperance union

the national council

All these supporters had their reasons to vote for conscription. Many people thought that conscription would be proof of their loyalty to Britain. The protestant church thought that it is essential because they thought that the Germans were evil and needed to be defeated. Women thought that conscription is a way of support to the troops who were already in battle. There were also many other reasons like simply defeating the " Hun". The list went on. As the voting time came closer they started calling the men who didn't enlist " shameful".

A poster reminding

Men about Australia's

Promis to Britain and

Encouraging the yes vote

Division in Australian society

Due to all the campaigning and the different views, the Australian society was divided in half, those for conscription and those against it. Both parties tried restlessly to obtain more votes. Many women sent white feathers to men as a symbol that they are cowards for not joining which added a lot of pressure to the men. The division continued and so did the campaigns until finally the voting time came and the votes showed that the referendum was not to be put into practice. But Billy Hughes was not going to give up that easy he then held a second referendum which was voted for on 20 December 1917. The "no" votes won again reflecting the division among the Australians. In both of the referendums the difference between the two was not too far of which means the Australian society was divided in half.

In conclusion, conscription for overseas military service was never introduced and the war had to continue with only the voluntary enlistments of Australian men who were ready to take on the opponent. The war finally ended, with a high toll, on the eleventh of the eleventh at 11am.