

The conscription debate – australia



Throughout Australia's history few disputes have divided Australian society as much as the conscription debate did in World War 1. Introduction to the idea of conscription in 1916 posed a lot of questions and many were left unanswered.

From individual family members to Labour Party members, every person had their own view about conscription and the moral issues associated with it. In 1914 when World War 1 started many young men enlisted to the army with their heads full of adventurous notions, unaware of the horrors they would face when they reached the battleground. Even throughout 1915 the number of volunteers continued to increase up to heights of 36500 in July, although this patriotism did not last long. Enlistments started to decline in 1916, as the Australian public became more aware of the conditions facing their AIF troops overseas. Prior to this, Prime Minister William (Billy) Hughes had promised Britain a supply of 16500 troops every month, with only 5500 men enlisting at the time. Hughes had to do something about the decreasing number of volunteers, which he did through introducing the issue of conscription.

Under the Australian constitution, Australians were able to be conscripted to defend the country in Australia. This meant that they could not be forced to fight overseas. For this reason, Prime Minister Hughes had to make a change to the constitution. There were a few reasons why he chose to do this, one being that he had visited the Somme earlier, one of the worst battlegrounds in World War 1 and believed that conscription would be able to stop further bloodshed in similar areas. Another reason he wanted to introduce conscription was because Britain had previously done the same in 1916, and

he thought that by following their example he would gain their approval. However, as he belonged to the Labour party who were traditionally anti-conscription, many fights and disagreements arose. Recognising that he wouldn't get the support needed to pass a referendum in parliament, Hughes proposed a vote of the Australian public, which was held on the 28th of October 1916.

The lead up to this vote incited conflict and division among all Australians. The vote was very close, with conscription being rejected 51 to 49 percent. On hearing these results, Hughes was disappointed in the Australian public, and in his own political party. On the 14th of November 1916 Hughes and 23 of his supporters stormed out of a party meeting. They formed a new political party called the Nationals, and aligned themselves with the Liberals.

The issue of conscription had managed to divide the long-standing Labour party. Parliament would never be the same again. The conscription debate also divided middle and lower class Australians to a larger extent than before.

The Labour party was strongly anti-conscription for a number of reasons. They knew that they were the type of people eligible to be sent to war because they were young, single, and belonging to the lower class. Supporting the Labour party was the Unions, or lower working class.

They argued that introducing conscription would mean a loss of productivity and profit, because their sons would be sent to fight instead of helping their family businesses. Farmers from the lower class especially objected to the idea of conscription. As well as this, there was a national feeling of rebellion

towards Britain, as many Australians reasoned that this was their war, not ours. They believed that conscription only lead to death and therefore were strongly opposed to the idea. The Australian Liberal party and the Nationals were supported by the middle class, who were pro-conscription. The majority of the middle class was loyal to Britain, and felt that it was their duty to help the British win the war.

Many of these people were of British descent, and so felt a strong tug towards supporting their roots. Some even believed that God was calling for more troops. Because of these conflicting opinions, many new disagreements arose between the different social classes. The debate over conscription divided also business managers, trade unionists.

Men of business managers usually read the newspapers, which were usually written from a pro-conscriptionist point of view. They were happy to support Britain, and also knew that profits could be gained from a continuation of the war. Trade unionists and workers could see this and did not want to be exploited by the business managers who were only looking out for their own interests.

For this reason, they fought passionately against conscription. The dispute over conscription also divided Australia on a religious line. While the Protestant church strongly supported conscription, the Catholic church was anti-conscription. This was for a number of reasons, one of these being that although the Protestant church held many strong ties with England, many members of the Australian Catholic church were Irish and distrusted Britain because of their harsh treatment of Irish people. While the Protestant church

held the slogan 'fighting for God, king, and country', the Catholic Archbishop of the time Daniel Mannix declared himself wholly against conscription, saying that he hoped all Australian people would be on the side of freedom for Australia.

The issue of conscription also divided Australian women. Many women believed that conscription was wrong, and formed peace groups such as The Women's Peace Army with slogans such as 'don't send our sons'. Mothers whose sons were eligible to be conscripted, and wives who did not want to lose their husbands supported these groups.

Other women supported conscription. Some of these were mothers who had sons already fighting in the war, because they wanted the war to end more quickly and did not want to be the only mothers sacrificing their sons. Many of these women were later influenced by an anti-conscription campaign called The Blood Vote, which depicts the pen as a knife and tells a story of a woman who voted 'yes' and sentenced a man to die. As a result of this campaign, many women who were previously pro-conscription ended up voting 'no' to conscription.

As well as people on the home front of Australia, soldiers were also divided on the issue of conscription. Some were for conscription, as they did not want to be the only people risking their lives for their country. Others were against conscription because after coming to the war and experiencing the fear and terrible circumstances, they did not want to force their fate upon others. Another reason some Australian soldiers were against conscription was that they did not want to fight with men who were not committed to the

war, as they felt that these people would only bring them down. For these reasons, the majority of soldiers voted against conscription. In December 1917 Hughes held another vote on the issue.

This time he already had the support he needed in both Houses of Parliament and did not need the vote. However, he wanted to give the people another chance to overcome what he saw as their ??? great mistake??? in rejecting conscription the previous year and give them a chance to redeem themselves. The campaign led to many more disagreements and divisions between Australians.

To Hughes??™ bitter disappointment, the public again voted NO. Conscription was defeated, this time by a slightly larger margin.