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27 OCTOBER 2016

## Political attitudes to conscription: 1914–1918

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## Introduction

Following the 1914 election, the Federal Parliament comprised members of the governing Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Commonwealth Liberal Party (CLP) in Opposition, and one Independent Member of Parliament (MP). Although both major parties generally supported Australia's participation in the First World War, only the CLP came to demonstrate unanimous advocacy for the conscription of Australian troops for overseas service.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the ALP became heavily divided over conscription and eventually split, resulting in the creation of the Nationalist Party—made up of breakaway ALP conscriptionists and the CLP.

This paper provides a narrative history of the major political parties' attitudes to conscription. Significant focus is given to the ALP, due to the major internal division which conscription caused across all elements of the party. This is also the story of the Nationalist Party and its irrepressible leader (and avid conscriptionist) William 'Billy' Hughes, whose seven and a half years as Prime Minister commenced with a tumultuous 13 months leading the ALP, the party he had first joined as an organiser in 1893.<sup>2</sup> The turbulent Commonwealth-state relations of the period are also addressed in this paper, as the conscription debates demonstrated the stark differences across the various states and their local communities, as well as the divergent views between parliamentarians and their constituents.

## Attitudes of the Australian Labor Party

### Federal government

The pro-conscription campaign within the ALP was led first and foremost by its federal parliamentary leader, Billy Hughes. Hughes' background offers some clues as to his passionate stance; for instance, he had previously enlisted in a volunteer battalion of the Royal Fusiliers in London during 1884. Historian Ken Inglis further contended that by 1900, Hughes certainly 'saw racial purity as the essential condition for all other policies of the new nation, and compulsory military training as a necessary means for keeping Australia white'.<sup>3</sup> In 1905 Hughes had also helped establish the Australian National Defence League, which during 1916 urged the federal government to immediately adopt conscription. Hughes even cited his union background as further evidence for conscription, stating in 1915 that compulsion should not be viewed as an ethical challenge for the ALP, as 'the very foundation of our great movement is compulsion'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Hughes' loyalty to the ALP itself had also proved to be a somewhat tenuous concept. Prior to the war, Hughes had written a weekly column in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* in which he championed the ALP's values.<sup>5</sup> However, following the dissolution of parliament in 1914 due to the upcoming election, Hughes brazenly recommended that the poll be abandoned and a wartime coalition government be formed, comprising both ALP and CLP members.<sup>6</sup> Having done little to generate much-needed solidarity within the ALP, Hughes declared after the first conscription plebiscite in late 1916, 'do not think that the referendum is the cause of [the ALP split]—it is only the occasion for it'.<sup>7</sup>

The ALP Senator for Western Australia, PJ Lynch, was another early advocate of conscription, declaring on 9 June 1915 that 'I feel convinced that if a vote was taken of those men whose names appear on the roll of honour, they would vote for conscription, and I believe, also, that the soldiers who are behind the trenches would vote for it'.<sup>8</sup> However, others such as Frank Anstey regarded the First World War as a cultural battle between the

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1. Unless otherwise specified, this paper will refer to conscription for overseas service simply as 'conscription'.

2. D Horne, *In search of Billy Hughes*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1979, p. 21.

3. K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war, 1911–45', in R Forward and B Reece, eds., *Conscription in Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, QLD, 1968, pp. 23–4.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 33; J Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', in J Beaumont, ed., *Australia's war: 1914–1918*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards [NSW], 1995, p. 45; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1968, pp. 133, 121.

5. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 107.

6. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, Victorian Historical Association, Melbourne, 1974, p. 3.

7. Despite being frequently referred to as a 'referendum', the ballots in 1916–17 were technically plebiscites, as the Government was not seeking a mandate to change the constitution (which would require a referendum); Quoted in M Booker, *The great professional: a study of W.M. Hughes*, McGrath Hill Book Co., Sydney, 1980, p. 203.

8. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war of 1914–1918*, volume 11, p. 297.

working class and capitalists, a belief which largely fuelled his own involvement in the anti-conscription movement.<sup>9</sup>

Despite his declaration on 31 July 1914 to 'stand behind [Britain] and defend her to our last man and our last shilling', Prime Minister Andrew Fisher was not inclined to publicly entertain notions of conscription.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he emphasised to a Trades Hall Council delegation on 24 September 1915 that he was 'irrevocably opposed to conscription' and was sure his other colleagues shared this view.<sup>11</sup> Fisher's belief was reportedly a purely pragmatic one, based on the understanding that conscription would be too inherently divisive and too much trouble to enforce.<sup>12</sup>

Billy Hughes, who succeeded Fisher later in 1915, had also maintained a public profile of only advocating voluntary military enlistment up to this point. For example, on 16 July 1915 in the House of Representatives, Hughes commended the War Census Act to the House by categorically declaring that 'the Bill is not for the purpose of conscription for service either in Australia or abroad. In no circumstances would I agree to send men out of this country to fight against their will'.<sup>13</sup> However, the proposed census specifically asked respondents (all males aged between 18 and 60 years of age) about their health, occupation, military training and financial resources.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, some within the ALP caucus were suspicious of the legislation, regarding it as merely a government tool to make conscription easier to eventually implement.<sup>15</sup> The ALP member for Brisbane, William Finlayson, was particularly dubious and asked that the House insert a clause into the Census Act Bill to ensure 'that no object of the Bill is in the direction of conscription'.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 December 1915, Hughes continued to hedge his language regarding conscription, telling a group from the Brisbane Trades Hall Industrial Council:

so far as I know, I believe, and I hope, that no circumstances will compel the adoption of conscription. However, there are circumstances, which, I venture to say, if only you were aware of them, would result in every Britisher in your Council not only approving of it, but enthusiastically assisting in giving effect to it.<sup>17</sup>

The long-standing ALP stalwart, EJ Holloway, was deeply critical of Hughes' ambiguous stance on conscription, lamenting that 'when Fisher resigned we lost a man whose word was his bond. When Hughes was elected we got a man whose word was much more flexible'.<sup>18</sup>

Hughes' transition to overt support for conscription was completed in 1916, during his visit to England for official discussions regarding the war effort. When the British Parliament determined that married men should be conscripted (following its earlier decree in January 1916 that only enforced conscription upon unmarried men) Hughes was in London, in the midst of such political machinations.<sup>19</sup> Correspondence between Hughes and his Defence Minister (Western Australia senator, George Pearce) at the time also inferred that a draft scheme to implement conscription had been created even before the Prime Minister's return to Australia in mid-1916.<sup>20</sup>

However, Hughes stopped short of publicly advocating conscription in the weeks following his return to Australia.<sup>21</sup> If he had hoped to buy time to garner support from his parliamentary colleagues, it became quickly apparent that any legislation he proposed to enact conscription would not make it through the Senate, and was also likely to trigger resignations from Cabinet. Accordingly, Hughes sought to bypass parliament and on 30 August heralded 'a referendum of the people ... upon the question of whether they approve of compulsory oversea [*sic*] service to the extent necessary to keep our expeditionary forces at their full strength'.<sup>22</sup> Hughes

9. I Turner, *Anstey, Francis George (Frank) (1865–1940)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography website, accessed 24 January 2014.

10. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 3 August 1914, p. 14.

11. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 25 September 1915, p. 17.

12. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 299.

13. W Hughes, '[War census speech](#)', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 16 July 1915, p. 5066.

14. [War Census Act 1915 \(Cth\)](#), accessed 20 June 2016.

15. P Weller, ed., *Caucus minutes 1901–1949: minutes of the meetings of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, Volume 1; 1901–1917, Melbourne University Press, Carlton VIC, 1975, p. 373.

16. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 117.

17. K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war', op. cit., p. 32.

18. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription in 1916–17*, Anti-conscription Jubilee Committee, Carlton VIC, 1966, p. 4.

19. K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war', op. cit., p. 33.

20. E Andrews, *The ANZAC illusion*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 121.

21. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., pp. 336–7.

22. W Hughes, '[Ministerial war policy speech](#)', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 30 August 1916, p. 8403.

further indicated his assured belief that ‘the people of Australia will carry this referendum by an overwhelming majority. No effort of mine shall be spared to bring that about, and, with the assistance of honourable members on both sides of the House, we shall do it’.<sup>23</sup>

Two days later Hughes again addressed parliament to advocate for conscription. Quoting his predecessor that Australia is ‘compelled to fight for her own existence and her liberties “to the last man and the last shilling”’, Hughes reaffirmed his evolution into becoming ‘an advocate of what is termed conscription’.<sup>24</sup> He sought to explain this by stating:

While I have favoured compulsion for home defence, I have hitherto been against compulsion for oversea service. But now iron circumstance compels me, as it has compelled others, to disregard this distinction. We are faced with facts, and we must not turn aside, and so attempt to evade that which cannot be evaded. What does it matter what we thought yesterday? We have to consider now what is the best and quickest way of doing the thing that has to be done ... I am going into this referendum campaign as if it were the only thing for which I lived.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Hughes’ enthusiastic optimism, the Military Service Referendum Bill (which served as the legislative foundation for the conscription plebiscite) failed to attract broad support from Labor MPs. Nineteen ALP parliamentarians voted against the Bill, and the Member for Yarra, Frank Tudor, used the occasion to resign from the ministry in protest. Tudor’s main concern with conscription was his belief that it hampered the cause of voluntary recruitment, and so he felt compelled to oppose the proposed plebiscite. However, with unanimous support from the CLP, the Bill passed to authorise the plebiscite question: ‘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?’<sup>26</sup>

Both the conscriptionist and anti-conscriptionist movements officially opened their respective campaigns on 18 September 1916. Hughes led the conscriptionists’ rally at the Sydney Town Hall.<sup>27</sup> Their anti-conscriptionist opponents gathered in Ballarat, led by Victorian ALP senator John Barnes, and James Scullin, who was the force behind the anti-conscriptionist local newspaper, the *Evening Echo*.<sup>28</sup> In his remarks, Scullin asked his audience ‘what did Australia go out to fight? Was it not the cursed military system [the conscriptionists] were now trying to force on Australia?’<sup>29</sup> Four days later at the anti-conscriptionists’ campaign launch in New South Wales (NSW), Frank Anstey posed a similar question, asking ‘what is the good of victory abroad if it only gives us slavery at home?’<sup>30</sup>

At the beginning of October 1916, the stakes were raised on both sides. The leading government anti-conscriptionist Frank Tudor issued a statement declaring that 34 federal ALP parliamentarians were opposed to conscription.<sup>31</sup> Undaunted by this, Hughes endorsed a government proclamation that all unmarried men aged 21–35 should make themselves available for military service within Australia. In making this announcement (which was an implicit precursor for implementing conscription) Hughes further demonstrated his unwavering belief that the upcoming plebiscite would result in a decisive ‘yes’ vote. However, the historian LL Robson has stated this decision to be ‘not the cleverest of moves’, as there was arguably little thought as to its broader implications. Indeed, even the avidly-conscriptionist NSW Labor Premier, William Holman, believed this pre-emptive initiative to be one of Hughes’ greatest blunders.<sup>32</sup>

While the proclamation establishing compulsory military service was significant in exposing those called-up to their potential future under conscription, the political fallout was also substantial.<sup>33</sup> This stemmed from revelations that on 25 October, at a government executive council meeting in Melbourne, Prime Minister

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23. Ibid., pp. 3–4.

24. W Hughes, ‘[Ministerial war policy speech](#)’, House of Representatives, *Debates*, 1 September 1916, p. 8424.

25. Ibid., pp. 3–4.

26. K Inglis, ‘Conscription in peace and war’, op. cit., p. 34; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 167.

27. The text of Hughes’ address is contained in L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., pp. 169–174.

28. J Beaumont, ‘The politics of a divided society’, op. cit., p. 46; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 174.

29. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 174.

30. Ibid., p. 183.

31. Ibid., p. 195.

32. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.: a study of its recruitment 1914–1918*, Melbourne University Press, Kingsgrove NSW, 1970, pp. 107–8.

33. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 3.

Hughes had proposed that men who were eligible for the recent call-up—but had not yet attended the required camps—would have their plebiscite ballots marked and put aside. Hughes had reportedly made a veiled reference to this plan two days earlier in a speech at Albury, NSW, in suggesting that those men who had ignored the call-up, but intended to vote in the plebiscite, would ‘get the surprise of their lives’.<sup>34</sup> The Treasurer, William Higgs, Vice-President of the Executive Council, NSW senator Albert Gardiner, and honorary Cabinet Minister, Edward Russell, all rejected this proposal, causing Hughes to reconvene the meeting in Sydney two days later. With a smaller but more conducive quorum of conscriptionists on side, Hughes’ motion requiring compulsory military service was passed and included in the Government Gazette that night.<sup>35</sup>

This resolution shocked the broader ALP caucus, with Higgs, Gardiner and Russell all resigning from the ministry after their original rejection of the motion was deliberately ignored. Despite Hughes’ attempts to censor news of these resignations prior to the plebiscite (at the suggestion of the Governor-General, Munro Ferguson), the news had already become public. All Hughes could do to avoid further embarrassment was withdraw his resolution—which he subsequently did.<sup>36</sup> In his analysis of the events, the historian Leslie Jauncey praised the ‘timely action’ of the three ministerial resignations, which ‘prevented what might well have been the tinder that would have set the quiet tension into a burst of disorder at the polls’.<sup>37</sup>

The day before the plebiscite, Hughes and 17 other premiers, opposition leaders and notable politicians (including other ALP members) issued a final plea for conscription, declaring:

Fellow Australians, in this tremendous crisis of our history the courage and sanity of the Australian people must rise superior to the mendacities with which their ears have been filled. The issue is whether, as a people, we shall stand in the noble company of brave nations who are fighting the battle of civilisation, or shall rank for ever as the first to quit in the fight. You know who are voting ‘no’. The advocates of the ‘no’ vote include every enemy of Britain open and secret in our midst. They include the violent and the lawless, the criminals who would wreck society and ruin prosperity. Will you dishonour Australia by joining their company?

It is absolutely false that Australia is to be denuded of her manhood by the Government proposals. We are asked to do, in proportion, less than half of what Britain is doing, and infinitely less than France has done. Let us be swiftly victorious in this war, and all our young soldiers will swiftly return to us. Are we to betray our own soldiers, who call upon us for help? Are we to sentence them to death by refusing them reinforcements in the dangers they bravely face? That Australia will refuse to stand behind her own soldiers is unthinkable. Face the test bravely at the poll on Saturday, and vote ‘yes’.<sup>38</sup>

On the same day, Hughes also wrote to his predecessor, Andrew Fisher, whom he had unsuccessfully tried to co-opt into the conscriptionist cause. In this correspondence Hughes lamented:

it is now apparent that there are elements in the Labor Party with which I have nothing in common, which in fact I hate and distrust ... I am worn with the storm and stress of a conflict—the most severe, the most bitter Australia has ever known. But I keep on!<sup>39</sup>

In terms of how ALP supporters cast their ballots in the plebiscite, there was no discernible ALP bloc which voted against conscription. According to voting analysis, safe Labor constituencies cast fewer votes against conscription than for ALP candidates in the last federal election. Additionally, although trade union affiliations and ALP party officials probably solidified some wavering ALP supporters to vote against conscription, this was far from universal and was only one of many competing influences.<sup>40</sup>

The plebiscite—which narrowly rejected conscription—was held on 28 October 1916. Just over a fortnight later on 14 November, the Member for Kalgoorlie, Hugh Mahon, and the Member for Darwin, King O’Malley, also resigned from the ministry as a defiant protest against Hughes’ leadership.<sup>41</sup> Later that day the ALP caucus met, and a vote of no-confidence in Hughes was moved by William Finlayson, and seconded by his colleague Joseph

34. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., pp. 208–9.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9.

36. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., pp. 115–6.

37. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 214.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 211–2.

39. G Souter, *Lion and kangaroo: the initiation of Australia 1901–1919*, Collins, Sydney, 1976, p. 254.

40. J Main, ed., *Conscription: the Australian debate, 1901–1970*, Cassell Australia, Stanmore NSW, 1978, pp. 73–4.

41. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 363.

Hannan, the Member for Fawkner.<sup>42</sup> Despite some caucus members' attempts to move amendments deferring judgement, Hughes responded to the motion by leaving the meeting, with 13 MPs and 11 senators following him in support. This exodus included three government ministers: the Minister for Defence, George Pearce; Minister for Navy, Jens Jensen; and Postmaster-General, William Webster.<sup>43</sup> The Western Australian senator Hugh de Largie—an avid conscriptionist—later recalled that 'we left the meeting before we were kicked out. The foot was raised to kick us, and we thought it was about time to move'.<sup>44</sup> These men came to comprise the new 'National Labor' Government, albeit with the political backing of the CLP.

Following Hughes and his pro-conscriptionist colleagues' defection, the ALP no longer held a parliamentary majority and was subsequently reduced to opposition status, with Frank Tudor installed as leader and Senator Gardiner as his deputy.<sup>45</sup> Shortly after Hughes and his followers walked out of the caucus meeting, the ALP released an official statement outlining the numerous grounds of the no-confidence motion made against the Prime Minister. Among these were reference to Hughes' dictatorial leadership style and his bold rhetorical attacks against the anti-conscription movement.<sup>46</sup> Yet despite such attempts to reassert itself, the ALP remained 'demoralised and bewildered'.<sup>47</sup> Having suffered an irrevocable split, the plebiscite result of 1916 was by no means an unmitigated success for the ALP. John Curtin, who would later become a Labor prime minister in 1941, published a manifesto in November 1916 warning that conscription could still be enforced despite the recent plebiscite result.<sup>48</sup> Curtin would ultimately come to support conscription in 1943, but this was when external forces threatened Australia's home front.<sup>49</sup>

As a means of taking stock, the ALP held a Special Commonwealth Conference in Melbourne on 4 December 1916, incorporating six delegates from each of the states 'called to deal with matters arising out of the conscription issue'. Victorian delegate (and future prime minister), James Scullin, moved that:

as compulsory overseas military service is opposed to the principles of the Australian Labor Party's platform, all federal members who have supported compulsory overseas military service, or have left the parliamentary Labor party and formed another political party, are hereby expelled from the Australian Labor movement.

Scullin contended that even if it was not overtly stated within the party platform, anti-conscription was essentially part of the ALP spirit. He furthermore asserted that if ALP members had desired to support conscription for overseas military service, they would have done so during the initial parliamentary debates regarding the 1903 Defence Act.<sup>50</sup>

Instead, the Defence Act specifically stated that 'Members of the Defence Force ... shall not be required, unless they voluntarily agree to do so, to serve beyond the limits of the Commonwealth'.<sup>51</sup> This aligned with Scullin's personal view that while he fully endorsed conscription to protect Australian soil, he felt that 'men should not be forced to go away to foreign frontiers and fight in a war in which they had never been consulted'.<sup>52</sup>

Scullin's motion seeking the expulsion of pro-conscriptionists from the party was received with general agreement, as its supporters contended that the ALP could not contain divergent views on conscription, as 'oil and water do not mix'. Others agreed with the premise but believed that a Commonwealth ALP conference should not punish members for a position that the Western Australian ALP executive had condoned.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the motion was carried 29–4, with the entire Western Australian delegation either voting against, or abstaining. Three of the Western Australian delegates were subsequently removed from the conference.<sup>54</sup>

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42. *Ibid.*, pp. 363–4.

43. G Souter, *Lion and kangaroo*, op. cit., p. 258.

44. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 365.

45. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 121.

46. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 16 November 1916, p. 6.

47. L Robson, *Australia and the Great War 1914–1918*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1969, p. 18.

48. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 245.

49. K Inglis, 'ANZAC and the Australian military tradition', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 64(11), April 1988, p. 11.

50. Australian Labor Party, '[Report of proceedings of the Special Commonwealth Conference called to deal with matters arising out of the conscription issue](#)', Labor Call, Melbourne, 1917, pp. 4–5, 10.

51. *Defence Act 1903* (Cth), section 49.

52. Australian Labor Party, '[Report of the seventh Commonwealth conference of the Australian Labor Party](#)', Labor Call, Melbourne, 1918, p. 32.

53. Australian Labor Party, '[Report of proceedings of the Special Commonwealth Conference](#)', op. cit., pp. 8, 9.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

In 1917 Hughes' second (and similarly unsuccessful) conscription plebiscite further mobilised the ALP around its anti-conscription values. Reasserting the party's message in the days before the second plebiscite, the ALP Opposition Leader, Frank Tudor, declared in a published manifesto:

The introduction of conscription into Australia would open the door to sweated female and child labour, and would no doubt be welcomed by those opposed to our 'White Australia' policy ... this year the employing classes of [Canada] have already asked for permission to import Chinese labour, and I have not the slightest doubt that similar requests will be made in this country immediately the bulk of our manhood has been transported oversea [*sic*] ... It is contended that Australia is the only country in the world that has not adopted conscription, but I would like to make it clear that no country has ever adopted conscription. The Government in each instance brought in conscription by Act of Parliament. Australia is the only country where the question was placed before the people, who, as you know, rejected it in October 1916, and it is to be hoped will do so again.<sup>55</sup>

## New South Wales

During his campaigns for conscription, Prime Minister Hughes received support at the highest levels of the ALP in NSW. Premier Holman, the last two state party presidents and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly were all conscriptionists, as were the majority of state Labor MPs.<sup>56</sup> Described as an 'eloquent and incisive conscriptionist', Premier Holman was also a high-profile supporter of the Universal Service League, which had been established in Sydney to provide practical support to the conscriptionist cause.<sup>57</sup>

However, this high-level support did not necessarily extend to the wider state ALP apparatus. For example, on 15 October 1915, the NSW ALP central executive passed a specific resolution (with Premier Holman and other conscriptionists in mind) that:

this Executive ... regrets that members have allowed the name of the [ALP] to be associated with their membership of the Universal Service League, and expresses the opinion that it is inadvisable for members to associate themselves with controversial issues upon which the Movement may be called upon to express an opinion.<sup>58</sup>

The NSW Political Labor League also publicly professed its opposition to conscription. It contended that the current provisions in the Defence Act regarding military service were appropriate and further argued the unfairness of politicians advocating for conscription when they themselves were not liable for service.<sup>59</sup> A leading proponent of this sentiment was James Catts—the federal member for Cook—who, as well as being both a federal and state ALP campaign director, also became a leading advocate of the anti-conscription movement. Catts believed that although conscription in defence of Australia was justified, this should not extend to sending men to fight in conflict overseas.<sup>60</sup>

On 4 September 1916, Hughes met with the NSW ALP central executive and attempted to garner its support for the Military Service Referendum Bill. Having spoken in vain until midnight, Hughes reportedly attempted to reconvene the following day with only his supporters and the minimum number of anti-conscriptionists to secure a quorum. However, the anti-conscriptionists were able to assemble the rest of their colleagues at the meeting, and so Hughes' proposal supporting conscription was rejected by a vote of 21–5.<sup>61</sup> Hughes and his fellow conscriptionist Ernest Carr (federal member for Macquarie) were summarily expelled from the NSW branch of the ALP and the executive also determined to disendorse other conscriptionist ALP candidates.<sup>62</sup>

A subsequent meeting occurred on 16 September where the central executive formally passed a resolution expelling Hughes from the ALP, as well as disendorsing other members—including the Premier, Minister for Education and NSW Attorney-General.<sup>63</sup> In response to his expulsion, Prime Minister Hughes reportedly declared:

55. 'Opposition case: Mr Tudor's manifesto', *The Argus*, Melbourne, 18 December 1917, p. 8.

56. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 118.

57. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 353; K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war', op. cit., p. 32.

58. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 120.

59. NSW Political Labor League, *The official history of the reconstruction of the Labor Party, 1916, together with 12th annual report of Women's Central Organising Committee*, Australian Labor Party, Sydney, 1917, p. 5.

60. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 185.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–1.

62. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 85.

63. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 16 September 1916, p. 18.

I do not recognise either the authority or the right of the ... executive to expel me ... this secret junta dares to tell me and those who stand with me that, on pain of expulsion, we must not speak as our consciences direct. But while I live I will say that which I believe to be right, and on this great question, which stands far above all party, nothing they can say or do will prevent me from pointing out to my fellow-citizens what has to be done to win this war.<sup>64</sup>

The enforced departure of William Spence, who had been an enduring ALP organiser and co-founder of the Australian Workers Union, was another contentious result of this purge. The former ALP official EJ Holloway suggested that Spence's long-standing friendship with the prime minister, rather than any overt conscriptionist sentiments, led him to follow Hughes. However, a biographer of Spence has disputed this, and instead contended that Spence became disillusioned with the ALP, believing it had 'deserted the best interests of the working man for socialist theory, and thus had abandoned practical trade unionism'. Possibly in recognition of Spence's longstanding commitment to the ALP, the NSW executive allowed Spence to officially resign from the party, in contrast to all other conscriptionist members who were formally expelled.<sup>65</sup> When Arthur Blakeley was pre-selected to Spence's electorate of Darling for the 1917 election, Spence relocated to Tasmania and won King O'Malley's former seat of Darwin as a Nationalist candidate at the by-election held later that year.<sup>66</sup>

Following the first plebiscite on conscription, Premier Holman entered into negotiations with the CLP to form a coalition 'Nationalist' government, citing the need for unity during a time of war. However, many ALP members saw this as a cynical attempt by Holman and other conscriptionists to maintain their hold on government.<sup>67</sup> Holman's newly-formed Nationalist Party was keen to negate conscription as an election issue, declaring that 'the issue of conscription, having been referred to the people of Australia, and decided by them in the negative, is settled. We accept unreservedly the verdict of the people and will give no support to any endeavour to raise the question again'.<sup>68</sup>

The Nationalist Party in NSW quickly found success at the subsequent state election, held on 24 March 1917, winning 52 seats compared to the ALP's 33 seats. This victory appeared to be an early indication—later confirmed by the Nationalist's success at the federal level—that the conscription plebiscite result was in no way consistent with the electorate's broader political sentiments.<sup>69</sup>

## Victoria

The historian Jauncey has suggested that, given the ALP's inability to win government in Victoria, its state branch was 'more of an opposition party' and therefore implicitly more comfortable opposing the government on conscription.<sup>70</sup> The Victorian state MP Maurice Blackburn exemplified this opposition, instigating a letter-writing campaign to federal ALP parliamentarians seeking assurance of their anti-conscription views. This reportedly resulted in securing 'many' pledges, but it is likely the campaign only worked to highlight existing sentiments, as opposed to enticing anyone to join the anti-conscriptionist cause.<sup>71</sup>

On 1 September 1916, two days after announcing his intention to hold a plebiscite on conscription, Prime Minister Hughes met with 20 members of the Political Labor Council of Victoria central executive to press the case for conscription. Although he acknowledged that he would never force conscription on Australians if they did not want it, his hour-long address claimed an immediate need for it, declaring France to be on its knees in the war. However, despite his arguments, Hughes failed to convert any of his colleagues to the cause of conscription, according to the then-ALP State President. The Secretary of the Victorian ALP executive also subsequently travelled to Sydney prior to Hughes' meeting with the NSWALP executive, to ensure its NSW colleagues heard a strong anti-conscription message prior to Hughes addressing them.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1916 plebiscite campaign, the Victorian ALP executive published an anti-conscription manifesto which government censors targeted through destruction of the printing type and confiscation of 10,000 copies

64. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 18 September 1916, p. 6.

65. R Linder, 'The Methodist love affair with the Australian Labor Party, 1891–1929', *Lucas*, 23 & 24, 1997–1998, pp. 44–46.

66. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription*, op. cit., p. 11.

67. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., pp. 120–1.

68. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 252.

69. NSW Parliament, '[1917 election totals—overall election results](#)', NSW elections links website, accessed 24 January 2014.

70. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 199.

71. B Walker, *How to defeat conscription: a story of the 1916 and 1917 campaigns in Victoria*, Ant-conscription Jubilee Committee, Northcote VIC, 1968, p. 4.

72. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription*, op. cit., p. 5.

(a tenth of the total first print run). The 'banned' manifesto became highly sought-after and generated heightened interest in the anti-conscription campaign.<sup>73</sup> The executive also organised anti-conscription meetings, including at the Melbourne Town Hall where speakers included Frank Anstey; Senator for Victoria, Edward Findley; New Zealand anti-conscription activist Robert Semple; and the father of Albert Jacka (the first Australian recipient of the Victoria Cross). During his address, Nathaniel Jacka rejected claims that he and his enlisted sons were conscriptionists—much to the approval of those in attendance—and would later declare that 'he wanted his sons to return to a free Australia'.<sup>74</sup>

Women in the Victorian ALP also exerted considerable energy within the anti-conscription movement. For example, Jane (better known as Jean) Daley organised the Labor Women's Anti-Conscription Committee in September 1916 and was reportedly 'one of the party's most effective speakers' against conscription.<sup>75</sup> Other notable female ALP advocates included May Francis, Jennie Baines and Muriel Heagney.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the state ALP apparatus' strong anti-conscriptionist position, its parliamentarians held mixed views. The Victorian MP Frank Tudor, who before the plebiscite was federal Minister for Trade and Customs, was reportedly delighted when the ALP executive approved his request to resign from Cabinet on account of his anti-conscriptionist beliefs. In contrast, the state ALP Opposition Leader, George Elmslie, decided to resign his position because he could not support the anti-conscription campaign, despite the state executive's calls for him to reconsider. However, the example of Victorian senator Edward Russell demonstrated the more fluid political nature of the conscription debate. Initially an anti-conscriptionist, Senator Russell reportedly reneged on his decision to resign from the federal Cabinet at the same time as Tudor, but later did so following Hughes' decision to set aside the ballots of those who refused the pre-plebiscite call-up to military service training. Yet despite this bold stance, the senator—and youngest member of the Labor Cabinet—was subsequently enticed to follow Hughes into the new Nationalist government, where he was rewarded by being made an Honorary Minister.<sup>77</sup>

The results of the 1916 conscription plebiscite demonstrated a clear distinction between Victoria's ALP members and its elected representatives, especially in the federal Senate. Despite five of the six Victorian-based federal senators being anti-conscriptionist—the exception being Senator Russell—the broader population narrowly voted 'yes' to conscription.<sup>78</sup> However, throughout 1917 the anti-conscriptionist elements within the Victorian ALP grew more emboldened and confident. For example, on 7 July, the Victorian Political Labour Council passed a resolution demanding the abolition of compulsory military training from both the ALP platform and the federal *Defence Act*.<sup>79</sup> Ongoing anti-conscription efforts within Victoria were also able to shift the state vote from supporting conscription in 1916, to opposing it the following year.

## Queensland

The Queensland branch of the ALP was unique during the conscription plebiscite campaigns of 1916–17, as the only ALP base which was largely unified against compulsion. This included its parliamentary members, where only one member of the state government Cabinet ministry was an acknowledged conscriptionist. The ALP central executive was a key driver of this overt anti-conscriptionist stance and threatened to disendorse any federal member who voted in favour of the Military Service Referendum Bill. All but one of the Queensland representatives heeded this warning, with Senator Thomas Givens (who later defected to the Nationalist Party) the only exception.<sup>80</sup>

Among the broad anti-conscriptionist sentiment, Queensland Premier Tom Ryan was a leading force. As the only governing anti-conscriptionist ALP leader, Ryan was highly-regarded by other ALP anti-conscriptionists for his courage, persistence and plain-speaking.<sup>81</sup> His Irish Catholic background was anecdotally a significant factor in

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73. Ibid., p. 7.

74. Ibid., p. 11; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 212.

75. J Smart, [Daley, Jane \(Jean\) \(1881–1948\)](#), Australian Dictionary of Biography website, accessed 21 January 2014.

76. B Walker, *How to defeat conscription*, op. cit., p. 2.

77. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription*, op. cit., pp. 16–7; W Hughes, '[Commonwealth war ministry procedural text](#)', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 22 February 1917, p. 10569.

78. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 32.

79. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 258.

80. Ibid., pp. 195, 163, 182.

81. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription*, op. cit., p. 11.

his anti-conscriptionist position, as this demographic was particularly subjected to heavy attack from conscriptionists during the plebiscite campaign.<sup>82</sup>

In November 1916 Prime Minister Hughes wrote to all state premiers declaring that state police (as opposed to military police) should take the lead in arresting civilians for offences against the Defence Act, which implicitly targeted anti-conscriptionist activities. However, Premier Ryan refused this request in what was one of many combative reckonings between the Queensland Premier and the prime minister.<sup>83</sup>

The most infamous of these occurred in 1917, prior to the second plebiscite on conscription. On 19 November, Premier Ryan spoke at a public meeting in Brisbane where he candidly voiced his opposition to conscription. Publication of this speech was subsequently censored but Premier Ryan responded by repeating the censored comments within the Queensland Parliament, where they would be recorded in Hansard. Within the parliamentary chamber Ryan boldly declared his belief that military conscription would inherently lead to industrial compulsion of labour and the destruction of trade unionism.<sup>84</sup> The premier also directed that 10,000 copies of his speech be made available to members of the public, in pamphlet form—orchestrated by the Australian Worker organisation.

Prime Minister Hughes directly intervened in his capacity as Attorney-General, and demanded that all copies of the Parliamentary Debates containing Ryan's censored remarks, and the related pamphlets, be seized. In discussing Ryan's remarks, Hughes declared:

I have a copy of the so-called *Hansard* before me. I have had an experience in Parliament extending over 23 years. I have consulted with men whose experience has been as long as my own. I have never seen a *Hansard* in the least degree resembling this. It is a *Hansard* in name only. It is in effect a no-conscription pamphlet, teeming with the greatest misrepresentation, and containing statements calculated not only to mislead the elector with regard to his vote on 20<sup>th</sup> December, but seriously to prejudice voluntary recruiting ... Rest assured, if some of the statements published in your so-called *Hansard* are repeated outside, I shall know how to deal with them.<sup>85</sup>

A legal fracas between Hughes and Ryan ensued; however, the High Court Chief Justice was loathe to entertain them, and suggested an indefinite adjournment of proceedings.<sup>86</sup>

It is also of note that Premier Ryan was also adopted by anti-conscriptionists outside his home state of Queensland. For example, on 16 December 1917—just days before the second conscription plebiscite—Ryan was revered as an anti-conscriptionist 'leader and hero' in front of a 120,000 person crowd at the Domain in Sydney.<sup>87</sup>

## Western Australia

In early June 1916, the Western Australian State Labor Congress met in Kalgoorlie to discuss the conscription issue. An initial motion opposing conscription was amended several times, to the point where the motion that eventually passed stated that 'in the interests of the defence of Australia and the Empire, this congress desires to express its confidence in the Federal Government'.<sup>88</sup> This motion essentially allowed Western Australian ALP parliamentarians to advocate their own individual views on conscription.

Western Australian Senator Patrick Lynch was reportedly the first federal ALP parliamentarian to publicly endorse conscription, while a member of the Legislative Council, James Cornell, was a relative late-comer in joining the conscriptionist movement.<sup>89</sup> At the 1916 ALP Commonwealth Conference, Cornell justified his stance through the belief that only conscription ensured an equality of sacrifice during wartime. However, the Victorian AWU organiser, John McNeill, rebuffed this opinion and instead contended that there had been no equality of sacrifice for Australia's working class, who had largely borne the brunt of the nation's war effort thus far.<sup>90</sup>

82. W Johnston and D Murphy, [Ryan, Thomas Joseph \(Tom\) \(1876–1921\)](#), Australian Dictionary of Biography website, accessed 22 January 2014.

83. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 108.

84. J Main, ed., *Conscription: the Australian debate*, op. cit., pp. 96–98.

85. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., pp. 298–9.

86. J Main, ed., *Conscription: the Australian debate*, op. cit., pp. 96–98, L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., pp. 174–5.

87. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 308.

88. *The Queenslander*, Brisbane, 17 June 1916, p. 37.

89. D Black, [Lynch, Patrick Joseph \(Paddy\) \(1867–1944\)](#), Australian Dictionary of Biography website, accessed 28 January 2014.

90. Australian Labor Party, 'Report of proceedings of the Special Commonwealth Conference', op. cit., p. 15.

Removed from the east coast epicentre of the conscription campaigns, Western Australia voted with the pro-conscriptionist minority in both plebiscites. Some reasons posited for this include the fact that parochial state loyalties may have prevailed, in support of the conscriptionist Minister for Defence and Deputy Leader, Senator George Pearce, who was noted as ‘an influential figure in West Australian politics’.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, it has been further suggested that Hughes’ absence from Western Australia during the campaigns ‘doubtless helped to preserve calm and maintain confidence in government’, the implication being that this ‘confidence’ helped to elicit support for conscription.<sup>92</sup>

### **South Australia**

In 1916, South Australia’s parliament contained 66 members, 59 of whom were regarded as conscriptionist.<sup>93</sup> Leading the conscriptionist campaign was the South Australian Premier and ALP Leader Crawford Vaughan, who in September 1916 cautioned Prime Minister Hughes that further censorship would not help the cause for conscription, and that in fact a relaxation of censorship may instead work to the Government’s advantage.<sup>94</sup> Some of the few anti-conscriptionists within the state government included Lionel Hill and Ephraim Coombe, who respectively became president and executive officer of the Anti-Conscription Council of South Australia.<sup>95</sup>

Yet despite the ALP Special Commonwealth Conference’s decree in December 1916 which moved for the expulsion of conscriptionist members from the party, several labour unions in South Australia refused to implement this.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, the South Australian branch of the ALP came to explicitly allow its representative parliamentarians to determine and express their own views on conscription. This regulation was only replicated in Western Australia, with the branches in the eastern states requiring blanket opposition to conscription from their members.<sup>97</sup> Despite this, only two South Australian federal parliamentarians stayed in the ALP after the split, Senator James O’Loughlin and Member for Adelaide, Edwin Yates.<sup>98</sup> The scale of this defection led the South Australian ALP President, Norman Makin, to lament in 1918 that more South Australian ALP members had left the party over the conscription issue than in any other state.<sup>99</sup>

### **Political impact on the ALP**

The central role of Hughes in dividing the ALP over conscription has often been asserted; by his former ALP colleagues at the time, to contemporary assessments of the former prime minister’s legacy. For example, the historian Leslie Robson has bluntly assessed that ‘Hughes practically single-handed destroyed the Labor Party’.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Hughes’ personal leadership of the conscription cause almost certainly led to the heightened intensity of the fracture, as the plebiscite campaign was largely fought in a spirit of ‘mortal hatred’.<sup>101</sup>

However, the official First World War historian, Ernest Scott, is more sympathetic to Hughes, declaring:

...it cannot be said that Mr. Hughes was indifferent to the unity of the party, nor could he be, since he was one of its creators, and it was the organised political force by which he had attained power ... Mr. Hughes was pre-eminently a party man.<sup>102</sup>

Conversely, Scott believed that Frank Tudor’s resignation from the Government in September 1916 ‘unmistakably marked the coming of the great cleavage which wrecked the Labour Party’.<sup>103</sup> Scott has, however, acknowledged that Hughes ‘did tend to make enemies of some who might have supported a less

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91. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 230.

92. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 35.

93. Australian Labor Party, ‘Report of proceedings of the Special Commonwealth Conference’, op. cit., p. 10.

94. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 96.

95. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., pp. 196–7.

96. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 372.

97. J Beaumont, ‘The politics of a divided society’, op. cit., p. 46.

98. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 247.

99. Australian Labor Party, *Report of the seventh commonwealth conference*, op. cit., p. 3.

100. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 118.

101. G Withers, *Conscription: necessity and justice, the case for an all volunteer army*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p. 7.

102. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 366.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

uncompromisingly aggressive leader. He was indiscriminate. His attitude was that all his opponents were tarred with the same brush, whereas in fact there were marked differences between [them]'.<sup>104</sup>

These differences, as the earlier pre-war context within the ALP demonstrates, fuelled already significant tensions within the Party. The outbreak of war further compounded these stresses, leading a newly installed government to manage an overseas military commitment, while simultaneously reconciling this with a traditional support base that largely opposed militarism.<sup>105</sup> As well as uncovering latent cultural divisions within the ALP, the conscription plebiscite also provided the opportunity for labour unionists—who provided the bulk of the ALP's resources—to purge the party of those politicians who did not fully embrace their agenda, under the premise of being conscriptionists.<sup>106</sup>

In retrospect, the senior Victorian ALP official EJ Holloway stated, 'I have seen men's loyalties tested in several crises during my lifetime in Labor's ranks. Never have I seen anything to compare, in that regard, with the conscription crisis'.<sup>107</sup> Such a declaration arguably stemmed from the hard political facts which followed the split: more than a third of ALP parliamentarians followed Hughes when he walked out in late 1916, while Tom Ryan became the only governing leader anywhere in the country who was anti-conscriptionist.<sup>108</sup> Historian Ernest Scott similarly mused that 'a large number of the men who had been the creators of the political Labour Party in [the] States and Commonwealth were now dissociated from the majority of its members. So extensive a loss of influential personnel was a severe handicap'.<sup>109</sup>

Yet Hughes demonstrated little sympathy for the state of his former party in the Parliament. In late February 1917 Hughes reminded the ALP of its earlier promise to:

...pursue with the utmost vigour and determination every course necessary for the defence of the Commonwealth and the Empire in any and every contingency [and that] in this hour of peril there are no parties, so far as the defence of the Commonwealth and Empire are concerned.<sup>110</sup>

Hughes also went on to suggest the reason that the ALP wavered in its total support for the war (through not supporting conscription) was:

The official Labour Party is no longer master of its own actions. It is a mere pawn in the hands of outside bodies. It does what it is told to do. If a member dares to murmur, to speak as he thinks, to let fall an indiscreet word, to reveal by word or act his true feelings, to protest against an intolerable tyranny, what a lot is his? He is a marked man. Even abject submission to the will of the juntas will not save him. He lives with the sword of excommunication suspended over his head.<sup>111</sup>

In the wake of the 1916–17 conscription plebiscites, the ALP was politically caught on the defensive. At the federal level in particular, the ALP suffered longstanding accusations of supposed disloyalty, incompetence in international affairs, softness on defence issues, and an inability to nurture key relationships with allies.<sup>112</sup> This was further compounded by its opponents' narrative that the ALP was increasingly aligned with the Catholic Church, which demonstrated its questionable loyalty to the Empire throughout the conscription debates.<sup>113</sup>

## Attitudes of the Commonwealth Liberal Party

The CLP Tasmanian senator Thomas Bakhap is recorded as the first parliamentarian to publicly express support for conscription. On 16 April 1915 he stated in the Senate chamber that 'it is not a popular thing for me to go

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104. *Ibid.*, p. 396.

105. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 21.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

107. E Holloway, *The Australian victory over conscription*, op. cit., p. 15.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

109. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 353.

110. W Hughes, '[Commonwealth war ministry procedural text](#)', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 22 February 1917, p. 10571.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

112. J Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', op. cit., p. 58; D Horner, 'Our finest hour: the fight that changed Australia', *The Australian Magazine*, 7 August, 1993, p. 11.

113. D Murphy, 'Religion, race and conscription in World War I', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 20(2), August 1974, p. 163.

out, as I have done, and say I believe in conscription ... but I feel that it is what I ought to say, and that I should be a poor custodian of the people's interests if I did not say it'.<sup>114</sup>

By mid-1916, the CLP was collectively a staunch advocate for conscription, revealed in such ways as its early support for the Universal Service League.<sup>115</sup> The CLP's early solidarity regarding conscription was also demonstrated by federal CLP representatives voting unanimously in support of the plebiscite-enabling Military Service Referendum Bill in September 1916.<sup>116</sup> One of the CLP's leading conscriptionists was the Member for Flinders, Sir William Irvine, who served as Attorney-General in the preceding Cook Government. In making his case for conscription on 3 October 1916, Irvine claimed in the Melbourne *Argus* that France was the 'home of conscription, the country in which democracy had begun and found its highest expression. The French democracy stood for liberty, equality and fraternity, but recognised its obligations'.<sup>117</sup> Irvine also claimed in the same article:

...it had been said by some women that they would not take the responsibility of sending other women's sons to their death. If you are worthy to be the wives and mothers of such men as have been sent from amongst us, put away all such sentiments. Surely they were strong enough to look real facts in the face and not be blinded by sentimentalism. The way before us was a long and bloody one. We could not turn back; we dare not stop'.<sup>118</sup>

After conscription was rejected in the 1916 plebiscite, Irvine pressed the Government to introduce conscription through parliament, regardless of the recent popular result. To emphasise his commitment, Irvine refused a ministerial position in the new Nationalist Party Government, so long as it continued to seek a popular mandate for conscription.<sup>119</sup>

State CLP leaders held views consistent with those of their federal counterparts, including the Western Australian CLP Opposition Leader Frank Wilson, who reportedly stated in June 1916 that 'I am in favour of a form of conscription that would not only bring the slackers into the ranks of the soldiers, but would embrace industrial organisations'.<sup>120</sup> The entire NSW branch of the CLP was recorded as being pro-conscription and at its state conference in July 1916 a resolution was passed in support of 'universal service' for the war effort.<sup>121</sup> Historian Ken Inglis has also noted that, among the CLP, 'enthusiasm [for conscription] was tempered only by a regret that the leader of their crusade [Prime Minister Hughes] was a man on the wrong side'.<sup>122</sup>

This 'tempered enthusiasm' was particularly recorded in South Australia where state politicians' ambivalence towards Hughes reportedly slowed their efforts in supporting the 1916 pro-conscription campaign.<sup>123</sup> However, even within the national CLP constituency, their vote in the 1916 plebiscite was divided. Polling analysis revealed that although in some metropolitan areas the pro-conscription vote was even higher than the Liberal vote at the last election, the majority of non-metropolitan voters—who usually supported the CLP—voted against conscription, possibly due to fears of potential labour shortages if conscription was enforced.<sup>124</sup>

## Attitudes of the Nationalist Party of Australia

The Nationalist Party of Australia was formed on 17 February 1917 as a formal merger between the CLP and the National Labor Party; the latter being the collection of conscriptionists expelled from the ALP throughout late 1916. Billy Hughes was able to maintain his hold on power until the formal merger was announced, having resigned and then been reappointed by the Governor-General following the CLP providing written assurance that it would support the minority National Labor Party in government.<sup>125</sup>

114. T Bakhap, '[Ministerial statement: paper speech](#)', Senate, *Debates*, 16 April 1915, p. 2393.

115. K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war', op. cit., p. 33; F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 6.

116. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., pp. 335–6.

117. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 3 October 1916, p. 7.

118. Ibid.

119. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., pp. 393–4.

120. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 134.

121. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., pp. 118, 137.

122. K Inglis, 'Conscription in peace and war', op. cit., p. 36.

123. P Gibson, 'The conscription issue in South Australia 1916–1917', *University Studies in History*, 4(2), 1963–64, p. 59.

124. J Main, ed., *Conscription: the Australian debate*, op. cit., p. 74.

125. G Souter, *Lion and kangaroo*, op. cit., p. 258.

Within a week Hughes announced his new Cabinet to the Parliament and, in regard to the conscription issue, declared:

...the policy of the Government is clear and definite; it intends to respect the verdict of the people delivered on the 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1916. It is, of course, impossible to see or say what the future may have in store, but it is clear that the electors of Australia alone can reverse their previous decision.<sup>126</sup>

When the Nationalist government was installed, it had a 23-seat majority in the House of Representatives but lacked control of the Senate by four seats. However, in the following weeks the Senate composition changed in unusual circumstances, with three ALP Tasmanian senators becoming affected, respectively, by an immediate need to travel, sudden illness and a nervous breakdown.<sup>127</sup>

The machinations became even murkier when the NSW ALP senator, David Watson, subsequently alleged that both Prime Minister Hughes and Defence Minister Pearce had sought to change his political allegiances through bribery. In recalling his conversation with the Prime Minister, Senator Watson claimed that Hughes had offered him a more conducive Senate seat or a non-parliamentary position if he vacated his role entirely.<sup>128</sup>

In response, Hughes emphatically denied any impropriety, stating that he merely 'appealed to [Senator Watson's] conscience, his convictions, and his courage'.<sup>129</sup> The Government blocked a motion from the ALP Opposition to have the matter investigated; however, the questionable nature of the situation led the Tasmanian Nationalist senators Bakhap and Keating to vote with the Opposition and trigger a double dissolution election, which was held on 5 May 1917.<sup>130</sup>

During the election campaign, the Nationalists attempted to clearly differentiate themselves as the 'Win-the-War' party, and their entire campaign largely centred on patriotic notions of supporting Australia's troops.<sup>131</sup> Among their campaign policies, the Nationalists promised that they would only introduce conscription if Australians agreed to it via a second plebiscite. This was generally seen as good politics but the strategy was not unanimously followed, as the Nationalists William Watt and William Irvine continued to assert the Government's need to enact conscription throughout the campaign.<sup>132</sup>

The Nationalist Party's victory in the 1917 election was decisive, as it won a further 21 seats in the House of Representatives and all 18 contested Senate seats. This included Hughes' comfortable victory in his new seat of Bendigo, having prudently left his former West Sydney electorate (which the ALP retained in the 1917 election).<sup>133</sup> The overall result provided further proof that the 1916 conscription campaign was not determined along party political lines, but was instead a reassertion of support for the war effort, albeit without the need for conscription.<sup>134</sup>

However, despite its significant electoral success, the Nationalist Party remained a problematic union, with former Liberals significantly outnumbering their ex-ALP colleagues within the party room. The historian Joan Beaumont has suggested that Hughes could only keep this coalition together by 'maintaining an atmosphere of crisis and emergency by fostering "the polarization of political life"'.<sup>135</sup> Yet with the war effort continuing to affect virtually all facets of Australian society, this 'polarization' proved relatively straightforward to accomplish.

### ***The second conscription plebiscite***

On 25 October 1917, William Irvine rejuvenated his campaign for conscription in Melbourne, telling a gathering at the Chamber of Commerce that not only should the Government 'stand or fall' on the imposition of conscription, it should also have the right to conscript labour into government-sanctioned state employment.

126. W Hughes, '[Commonwealth war ministry procedural text](#)', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 22 February 1917, p. 10574.

127. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., pp. 378–384.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

129. W Hughes, 'Allegations of attempted bribery and corruption: speech', House of Representatives, *Debates*, 2 March 1917, p. 3.

130. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 23; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 254.

131. E Scott, *Official history of Australia in the war*, op. cit., p. 393.

132. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 25; L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 256.

133. C Hughes and B Graham, *Voting for the Australian House of Representatives 1901–1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974, pp. 65–66.

134. F Smith, *The conscription plebiscites in Australia*, op. cit., p. 25.

135. J Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', op. cit., p. 51.

Irvine would also later declare that he ‘absolutely opposed a referendum [on conscription]. Surely if men are risking their lives we can be prepared to risk our seats’.<sup>136</sup>

Later, on 12 November, Prime Minister Hughes spoke at the Lyric Theatre in Bendigo, also to once again publicly campaign for conscription. He declared that ‘the campaign opened tonight raises issues vital not only to the very existence of the Commonwealth and the Empire, but to liberty and to civilisation’.<sup>137</sup> Hughes also recalled the previous conscription campaign, where:

...there was an orgy of gross misrepresentation, of vile slanders; the fears, the passions, the ignorance, the credibility of the citizens were appealed to by every device at the command of those who were determined that Australia should not honour her solemn pledges and fulfil her sacred duty to the Empire and to the cause of liberty ... October 28, 1916, was a black day for Australia; it was a triumph for the unworthy, the selfish, and anti-British in our midst ... They were doomed to a rude awakening on May 5. The electors, being loyal at heart, saw them as they were, reckless extremists, peace cranks, dis-loyalists, and pro-Germans.<sup>138</sup>

Hughes vigorously argued that conscription was necessary because ‘voluntary recruiting has failed’. This was not because of the lack of available personnel or the nation’s supposed war-weariness, but because of ‘a systematic campaign of poisonous doctrines insidiously disseminated throughout the country’.<sup>139</sup> The Prime Minister also reminded those in attendance that ‘every free nation that is fighting this great battle for liberty against military despotism has abandoned voluntarism’.<sup>140</sup>

Hughes emphasised that the decision to again campaign for conscription was not taken lightly, and cited his previous speeches where he stated that he would only instigate a second plebiscite if the circumstances of the war demanded it. Accordingly, he declared that ‘we have not sought an excuse for bringing this question before the people, but have acted only when recent events [specifically, the implications of the Russian revolution] created a situation so menacing that had the Government failed to act, it would have proved itself not only inept, but treacherous’.<sup>141</sup>

More specifically, Hughes called for a conscription ballot that would draw upon those single men aged 20–44 without child dependants. However, those men who were judged to be physically unfit or who would face undue hardship, were employed as judges, police magistrates, ministers of religion or in essential industries, or who were conscientious objectors, would be exempted from the ballot.<sup>142</sup>

Exemptions based on religious grounds would also be granted if an applicant’s ‘genuine religious belief forbade them to bear arms’, but this would not preclude them from being obliged to undertake non-combatant roles, and would not apply to ‘sudden converts’.<sup>143</sup> Also of importance was Hughes’ closing remark to the audience that ‘I tell you plainly that the Government must have this power [to enforce overseas conscription]. It cannot govern the country without it, and will not attempt to do so’.<sup>144</sup>

Published material citing the Prime Minister’s views was also subsequently circulated in the form of a pamphlet entitled *Reinforcements Referendum: Concise Catechism with Questions Answered by the Prime Minister*. In asserting many of the points contained within Hughes’ Bendigo address, it also emphasised that ‘the Government will not carry on without the power for which it is now asking’.<sup>145</sup>

In contrast to Hughes’ detailed arguments, other party leaders tried more emotive methods to encourage the adoption of conscription. For example, in a town hall speech in Chatswood on 19 November, the Minister for Navy, Joseph Cook, highlighted the stark need for conscription, declaring that their German enemy was ‘a foul

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136. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., pp. 264–5.

137. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 13 November 1917, p. 5.

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.

141. Ibid.

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid.

144. Ibid.

145. Reinforcements Referendum Council pamphlet, [Reinforcements referendum: concise catechism with questions answered by the Prime Minister](#), State Library of Victoria website, accessed 21 January 2014.

brood. They kill babies. They torture and starve prisoners. They destroy and defile ... They are fearful liars and the champion bullies of the world'.<sup>146</sup>

At a later meeting at the Melbourne Town Hall, the Minister for Works and Railways, William Watt, further declared that 'any man or woman who voted "no" [to conscription] was either ignorant or disloyal', while also claiming that many anti-conscriptionists were tainted with 'German influence and German gold'.<sup>147</sup> As the campaign continued, Hughes also grew more emotive in his speeches, such as his 24 November declaration:

If you turn down the government proposal, you not only cover the name of Australia with dishonour, gravely imperil safety and liberty, and prove yourselves unworthy of freedom, but you literally condemn some of the best and bravest men in the world—the men who are fighting for you—to death ... Electors, upon which side do you stand? In which camp will you pitch your tent? Will you stand with those who are resolved that come what may we will not desert our boys at the Front, that Australia shall do her duty to the Empire, that she shall stand side by side with Canada, New Zealand and Britain until victory is won, and the cause of liberty assured, or will you go into that camp in which every German, every Sinn Feiner, every IWW man, every reckless extremist has pitched his tent?<sup>148</sup>

After another arduous campaign, Australians went back to the polls on 20 December 1917 for a second plebiscite on conscription to answer the reworded question 'Are you in favour of the proposal of the Commonwealth government for reinforcing the Australian Imperial Force overseas?' The nature of this question was strongly criticised for assuming prior knowledge of the Government's specific 'proposals' regarding conscription.<sup>149</sup>

Anti-conscription advocates have highlighted the various means Hughes' Nationalist government attempted to disenfranchise segments of the population from the second plebiscite. For example, the electoral roll for the plebiscite was closed only two days after the ballot was announced, which affected regional voters who only received news of the plebiscite after the rolls had closed.<sup>150</sup> The fact that the poll was held on a Thursday also reportedly hampered workers' ability to cast their vote. Additionally, the Government determined that if British subjects (or their fathers) had been born in an 'enemy' country, they were unable to vote—unless more than half the sons in that family aged 18–45 had either enlisted or been rejected from enlistment.<sup>151</sup> There were also instances reported of polling booth officials intrusively questioning voters with 'foreign' names prior to issuing them with their ballot paper.<sup>152</sup>

The second plebiscite resulted in another majority 'no' vote, with an increase in the total vote against conscription, and the Victorian response switching from its previous majority 'yes' position in the first plebiscite. Despite the electorate's second rejection of conscription—and Hughes' previous statement that he could not govern the country if this happened—on 3 January 1918 Hughes was given a resounding vote of confidence in a ballot at a meeting of his Nationalist Party colleagues, with the result being 63–2 in favour.<sup>153</sup> Despite this support, Hughes dutifully offered the Governor-General his resignation five days later, but as no other Nationalist leader commanded sufficient support from caucus, he was subsequently asked to maintain his role.<sup>154</sup>

## Conclusion

Less than a year after the second fiercely combative conscription plebiscite, the First World War concluded on 11 November 1918. However, the impact of the 1916–17 plebiscites continued to be felt for a long time within Australia's political parties—especially the ALP. Spurned by many of its rank-and-file and parliamentary members, the ALP lacked strong charismatic leadership with enough experience and political nous to match Billy Hughes. Accordingly, the ALP's categorical defeat in the 1917 federal election was devastating. New South

146. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 20 November 1917, p. 7.

147. *The Argus*, Melbourne, 29 November 1917, p. 7.

148. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 118.

149. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 167.

150. J Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', op. cit., p. 54.

151. B Walker, *How to defeat conscription*, op. cit., p. 20.

152. L Jauncey, *The story of conscription in Australia*, op. cit., p. 311.

153. L Robson, *The first A.I.F.*, op. cit., p. 181; G Souter, *Lion and kangaroo*, op. cit., p. 263.

154. G Souter, *Lion and kangaroo*, op. cit., p. 263.

Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania all recorded over 10 per cent swings away from the ALP, with Queensland faring only marginally better. It would be more than a decade before the ALP returned to government, led by the anti-conscriptionist former newspaper editor, James Scullin. The ALP would also not have a majority in the Senate until 1943.<sup>155</sup> Conversely, while Billy Hughes ultimately saw his campaigns for conscription defeated, he more than proved his own political durability. Hughes remained Prime Minister until 1923, when he resigned after having won a further two elections as leader of the Nationalist Party. He continued to serve in parliament (across multiple political affiliations) until his death in 1952.

## Chronology of key dates

- 31 July 1914—Opposition Leader Andrew Fisher pledges the ALP would ‘stand behind [Britain] and defend her to our last man and our last shilling’.
- 5 September 1914—election of federal Labor Government
- 16 July 1915—War Census Bill debated in parliament
- 26 October 1915—Andrew Fisher resigns as Prime Minister, and is replaced by William ‘Billy’ Hughes
- 7 March 1916—Hughes arrives in England to discuss the war effort
- 31 July 1916—Hughes returns to Australia following his visit to Europe
- 30 August 1916—Hughes announces a national plebiscite on conscription
- 14 September 1916—Military Service Referendum Bill second reading in parliament; Frank Tudor resigns from the Government.
- 16 September 1916—Hughes is formally expelled from the NSW branch of the ALP
- 18 September 1916—official start of the conscriptionist and anti-conscriptionist campaigns
- 28 October 1916—first conscription plebiscite held
- 14 November 1916—Hughes and his supporters leave the ALP to form the National Labor Party
- 5 December 1916—ALP Special Commonwealth Conference votes to expel conscriptionists from the party
- 17 February 1917—Nationalist Party of Australia officially established
- 24 March 1917—New South Wales Nationalist Party decisively wins the state election
- 5 May 1917—federal election sees the Nationalist Party achieve a clear victory against the incumbent ALP
- 12 November 1917—Hughes opens second conscription campaign
- 20 December 1917—second conscription plebiscite held
- 8 January 1918—Hughes resigns as Prime Minister but is reappointed by the Governor-General

## Conscription plebiscite results

The below tables are reproduced from JM Main’s *Conscription: the Australian debate, 1901–1970*.<sup>156</sup>

### 1916

State/territory	Yes vote	No vote	Majority (total)	Majority (%)
New South Wales	356,802	474,523	117,721	57
Victoria	353,930	328,216	25,714	52
Queensland	144,017	157,049	13,032	52

155. [Psephos—Adam Carr’s election archive](#), website, accessed 30 June 2014.

156. J Main, ed., *Conscription: the Australian debate*, op. cit., pp. 73, 105.

South Australia	87,908	119,119	31,211	58
Western Australia	94,049	40,875	53,174	70
Tasmania	48,490	37,830	10,660	56
Territories	2,136	1,269	867	63
TOTAL	1,087,332	1,158,881	71,549	52

## 1917

State/territory	Yes vote	No vote	Majority (total)	Majority (%)
New South Wales	341,256	487,774	146,518	59
Victoria	329,772	332,490	2,718	50.2
Queensland	132,771	168,875	36,104	56
South Australia	86,663	106,364	19,701	55
Western Australia	84,116	46,522	37,594	64
Tasmania	38,881	38,502	379	50.2
Territories	1,700	1,220	480	58
TOTAL	1,015,159	1,181,747	166,588	54

Commonwealth of Australia



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