

The conscription debate

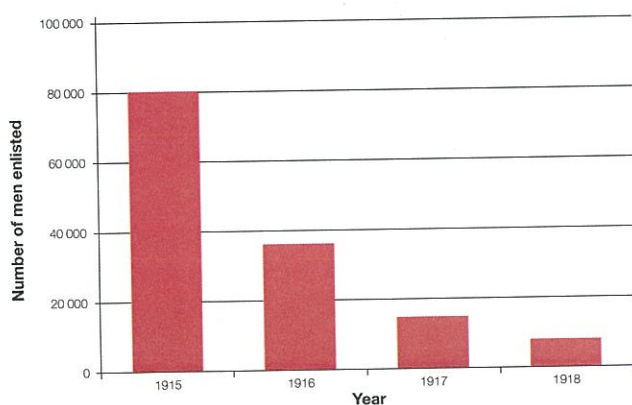
Despite the changes brought about in Australia by World War I, it did not impact on the Australian home front to the same degree as in France, Belgium, Italy, Russia, Turkey and Britain, where fighting took place. In these countries, civilians suffered through food shortages and regular military attacks. Because of the immediate danger faced, all of these countries had systems of **conscription** (compulsory service in the army) during the war. In Australia, however, service was not compulsory. This did not stop it from becoming one of the most divisive and bitter arguments of the war.

Enlistment

When the war began in 1914 many Australian men saw participation in the war as an exciting and noble cause. Men flocked to enlist as most expected the war to be over quickly. But as the war dragged on and information about the number of deaths and casualties emerged, volunteer numbers began to drop. Although there was a peak in enlistments after Gallipoli, from late 1915 numbers steadily declined.

As the numbers of men enlisting declined, the Australian government tried to pressure men to enlist through propaganda campaigns that either encouraged or shamed men into enlisting. The process of asking people to enlist is called recruitment.

Recruitment became an issue when the Australian Prime Minister William Morris (Billy) Hughes returned from a visit to Britain and the Western Front in 1916. Over 27 000 Australian soldiers had just been killed in the first five weeks of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Due to the decline in the number of Australian volunteers, heavy Australian losses



Source 8.63 Enlistments in the First AIF 1915–1918

and the critical state of the war on the Western Front, Hughes announced that there would be a **referendum** (a special national vote) to give the Commonwealth Government the power to force men of military age to join the army.

Hughes believed that Australia needed at least 7500 men to enlist per month if it was to maintain its fighting strength. To achieve this, he announced that we needed to introduce conscription. This was despite the fact that only a year earlier he had declared, 'In no circumstances would I agree to send men out of this country to fight against their will.'



Source 8.64 William Morris (Billy) Hughes

The conscription plebiscites

The issue of conscription triggered a major debate around Australia. In October 1916, Australians were asked to vote for or against conscription in a **plebiscite** (a public vote or opinion poll). A plebiscite is similar to a referendum, but its outcome is not legally binding and does not result in a change being made to the Constitution. The 1916 plebiscite was narrowly defeated. Most of Hughes' Labor parliamentarians were opposed to conscription and, as a result, the Labor Party split. At the end of 1916, Hughes and 24 of his supporters left the Labor Party and formed a new party known as the Nationalist Party. The Nationalist Party was made up of Hughes and his supporters, along with most of the former members of the Liberal Party. One year later, in 1917, a second plebiscite was held. Again, it was defeated. Hughes could still have introduced conscription, because the results of the plebiscites were not legally binding, but he chose not to.

Australia divided

Supporters of conscription tended to be middle- and upper-class people of British and Protestant background. These people, known as pro-conscriptionists, argued that it was the patriotic duty of Australians to continue to support the war effort. They accused opponents of being lazy and selfish, of being 'German lovers' and of letting down the thousands who had already given their lives. In pro-conscription **propaganda**, images of noble Australian

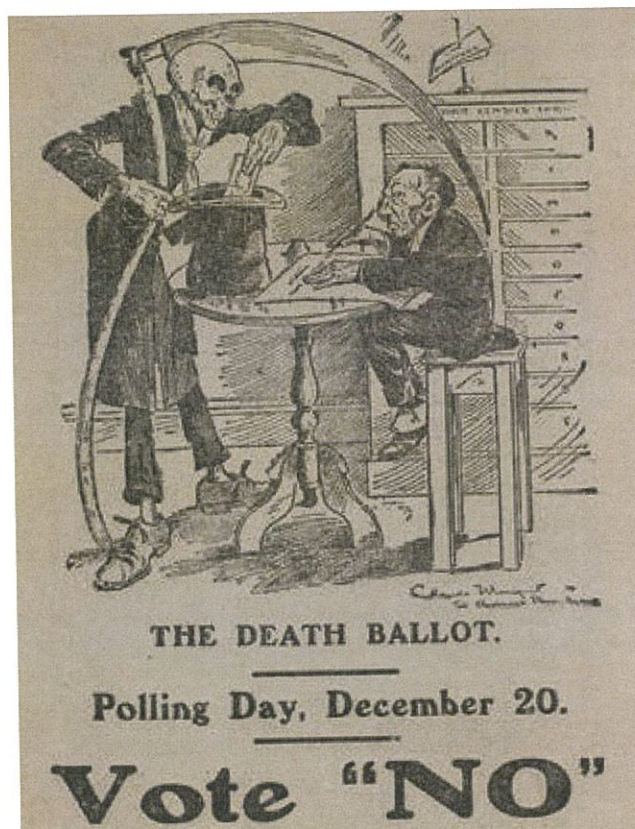
soldiers and their families are shown suffering for the good of the country as they fight the Germans.

Opponents of conscription were more likely to be working class, Catholic and of Irish background. Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix was the unofficial leader of the anti-conscription campaign and he urged Catholics to vote 'no'. Those who opposed conscription claimed that Australia had already given enough of its young men. They said that it was not really Australia's war. They also argued that several hundred thousand soldiers had gone voluntarily to the war and that it was not necessary to force Australians to fight. Anti-conscription propaganda urged people to vote 'no' in the plebiscite or 'Death Ballot' (see Source 8.66).

Many trade unionists opposed conscription, arguing that the war was a **capitalist** war and should not be supported. Some trade unionists also argued that if the majority of able-bodied Australian men were sent to the front, employers would begin to employ non-whites at lower wages, undermining the gains that Australian workers had made. Women were equally divided on the issue and were used by both sides of the campaign. Images of women and children frequently appeared in conscription propaganda (see Source 8.65).



Source 8.65 A pro-conscription poster produced in Australia around 1918. The word 'Hun' is a derogatory term being used here to refer to the Germans.



Source 8.66 An anti-conscription cartoon, printed in 1917, from the No Conscription Council Campaign Committee

Check your learning 8.14

Remember and understand

- 1 Why do you think both sides of the conscription debate used women, especially mothers, in their propaganda?

Apply and analyse

- 2 Why do you think that Billy Hughes held two plebiscites when he had the power to introduce conscription without the nation's support?
- 3 Can you explain why middle- and upper-class people were more likely to support conscription than working-class people?

Evaluate and create

- 4 Do you think the war might have affected Australia differently if conscription had been introduced? Conduct some additional research and write a 250-word report to outline the possible effects of conscription on the war effort and the home front.