

## **Politicians at war: the experiences of Australian senators and members in the First World War**

Sometime around noon on 25 April 1915, a 35-year-old sergeant of the Australian 1st Battalion lay mortally wounded in thick scrub above the beach that would later be known as Anzac Cove. Having come ashore with the second wave attack earlier that morning, men of the 1st Battalion were rushed inland to a position on Pine Ridge to help reinforce the tenuous foothold troops of the 3rd Brigade were holding in the face of growing Turkish resistance. Stretcher-bearers came to carry the wounded man back down the gully, but he refused. "There's plenty worse than me out there", he said, in what was the last time he was seen alive.<sup>1</sup>

Sergeant Ted Larkin was among 8,100 Australian and New Zealand troops killed and wounded at Anzac within the first week of fighting.<sup>2</sup> His body was recovered during the informal truce with Turkish troops in the following weeks, but the whereabouts of his final burial place remains unknown. As such, he is commemorated on the Lone Pine Memorial, alongside 4,934 Australian and New Zealander soldiers killed on Gallipoli who have no known grave. As a soldier, Larkin appears no different from the 330,000 men who served in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War, but as a civilian, he was among a number of state and federal politicians who saw active service with the AIF during the First World War.

According to figures compiled by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, 119 Australian MPs saw active service in the First World War: 72 were Members of the House of Representatives, 44 were Senators and three served in both chambers. Among them were nine federal MPs who fought while in office, and an estimated

---

<sup>1</sup> H.V. Cavell, *Imperishable Anzacs: A Story of Australia's Famous First Brigade*, William Brooks, Sydney, 1916, p. 78

<sup>2</sup> C.E.W. Bean, 'The Story of Anzac: The First Phase', vol. I, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, 11th edition, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1941, p. xxiii

twenty state MPs who saw active service abroad during their time in office.<sup>3</sup> Not only were these men who debated, decided and wrote legislature for the young Australian nation, but they like many Australians were personally affected by the war and nation's involvement in it. As the Labor member for Willoughby in New South Wales as well as the NRL's first full-time secretary, Ted Larkin was among the 10,000 men who enlisted at Victoria Barracks in Sydney within a fortnight of Britain's declaration of war against Germany in August 1914.<sup>4</sup> To a crowd outside the recruiting depot, Larkin announced this was 'a critical time for our Empire and I deem it the duty of those holding public positions to point the way'.<sup>5</sup>

The First World War casts an exceptionally long shadow over Australian history. From a wartime population of 4.5 million people, the cost of participating in the conflict was exceptionally high. Within four short years, the AIF sustained over 215,000 casualties, of which 60,000 died on active service, while countless others, and their families, lived with the war's psychological consequences for decades afterwards. Virtually every household and community in Australia was affected by the fighting, which included debates over the issue of conscription, which divided Australia along social, sectarian and political lines. My paper will this afternoon will demonstrate that the war also had a deep and lasting impact on Australia's political community – not just in the form of the political issues that affected the nation during the war, but on a more private level, impacting on serving politicians in both state and federal politics whose sense of loyalty, duty and patriotism to the broader British Empire led them to become active participants in the fighting.

The First World War is often seen today as a costly and futile slaughter of no real gain or outcome, but in 1914, Australians like Ted Larkin were deeply and personally committed to Australia's military commitment to the conflict. This was mainly due to the fact that Australia was a dominion of the British Empire and

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Commonwealth Members of Parliament who have Served in War: Colonial Wars and the First World War', Parliamentary Library Research Paper Series, 2014-15, 19 September 2014, p. 7. Estimates of MLAs who served in the First World War is based on Roll of Honours compiled by the NSW, Victorian and West Australian Legislative Assemblies.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, Allen & Unwin, 2014, p. 21

<sup>5</sup> 'MLA for the Front', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, 20.8.14, p. 18

shared exceptionally close ties with Britain when war began. The six self-governing British colonies had federated just thirteen years before the outbreak of war; 20 per cent of the population residing in Australia had been born in Britain; and on the international level, Britain still managed Australia's diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. These strong ties to the "mother country" meant there were few dissenting voices in Australia in August 1914 when German troops invaded neutral Belgium, putting an invasion force within 100 kilometres of the English Channel ports, and Britain declared war.

Australia was automatically at war along with the rest of the dominions when Britain declared war on Germany. This may seem absurd to modern Australians, but the government at the time was willing to accept Britain's decision without question, believing that defending the rights of small countries like Belgium and containing German expansionism in Europe were core interests for Australia. News that Britain was at war with Germany came in the midst of a federal election campaign where it received unanimous support from ***both*** sides of politics. One of the earliest overtures took place at Horsham in Victoria, weeks before war was declared, when the incumbent Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, announced that if war broke out in Europe all of Australia's resources would be committed for the preservation of the British Empire. His opponent, the leader of the Australian Labor Party, Andrew Fisher, echoed the sentiment at Colac where he famously declared Australia would stand beside 'our own to help and defend [Britain] to our last man and last shilling'.<sup>6</sup>

Recruiting began for the Australian Imperial Force on 11 August in order to fulfill the government's pledge to send Britain a military force of 20,000 troops in the form of an infantry division and a light horse brigade; but by the end of the year, more than 50,000 men were ready for active service abroad. Outside Victoria Barracks, Ted Larkin urged all in public office to lead by example and volunteer for overseas service, but the reality was that very few members in state and federal parliament at the time would have met the strict eligibility requirements. At the start of the war, the AIF required applicants to be between the ages of 18 and 35, a height

---

<sup>6</sup> Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, pp. 16-17

of 5 foot 6 inches and a chest measurement of 34 inches; since the average age of Federal MPs at the time was 43, most were either too old or unfit to serve. Recruiting standards lowered after Gallipoli as mounting casualties and falling enlistment numbers resulted in a greater need to fill reinforcement quotas, so it was not until later on in the war that most MPs could follow Ted Larkin's example.

In January 1916, at the age of fifty-one, the federal member for Bendigo, Alfred Hampson, fronted the recruiting depot at Melbourne's Town Hall where he passed the medical test but was turned away because of his age.<sup>7</sup> Undeterred, Hampson tried a second time after losing his seat to Billy Hughes in the 1917 federal election. After leaving parliament and lying about his age, Hampson was eventually accepted into the AIF and served on the Western Front in the final months of the war with the 2nd Light Railway Operating Company.<sup>8</sup>

Some MPs had political and religious reasons that prevented them from serving in the AIF, and certainly, some felt a moral obligation to their constituencies to remain in Australia. During the 1914 federal election, the senior member of the federal Labor opposition, Billy Hughes, suggested suspending the election during the international crisis in support of a government of national unity. Hughes' proposal meant elected members would return unopposed, but the idea was considered unworkable and was quickly forgotten.<sup>9</sup> Federal MPs who felt duty-bound to enlist took a leave of absence and generally came from parties that occupied safe seats, while those in marginal seats were more inclined to enlist after the 1917 federal election.

William Fleming, the federal member for Robertson, enlisted as a private in 1916 following news that his old Labor opponent, William Johnson, had been killed at Pozières. Fleming was still in camp when his conservative seat was contested by Labor candidate Eva Seery – one of the first women endorsed by a major party to contest the Australian parliament – who questioned the duration of his training and

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Mr Hampson Enlists', *The Bendigonian*, 27.1.16, p. 9

<sup>8</sup> NAA, B2455, Hampson, A J

<sup>9</sup> Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, p. 17

accused him of 'playing at soldiering' to secure votes.<sup>10</sup> An ardent patriot who opposed conscription, Fleming's personal decision to enlist helped Hughes and his National colleagues brand themselves as the 'Win-the-War' party, conveying the message that that they alone could lead Australia to victory for the imperial cause. Fleming successfully retained his seat and sailed for England five months later as a driver with the Australian Army Service Corps. Promoted to sergeant, he was gassed at Péronne in France in September 1918 and returned to Australia after the armistice.<sup>11</sup>

Some politicians simply could not face the shame of not going to the war. One was James O'Loughlin, the only sitting Senator to serve overseas, who enlisted in 1915 and declared to the Defence Minister, George Peace, that "If you cannot put me in the firing line, put me as near to it as you can".<sup>12</sup> Another was Granville Rylie, a distinguished Boer War veteran and National member for North Sydney, who wrote to his wife on the 4 August 1914: 'I couldn't look men in the face again, especially some of my political opponents whom I have accused of disloyalty, if I didn't offer to go. I simply cannot hold back'.<sup>13</sup> A major in the part-time militia, and commander of the 3rd Light Horse Regiment, Rylie typified a number of militia officers who held political positions in the years after Federation. With substantial command and leadership experience backed by years of overseas service, men like Rylie were fundamental in raising, training and commanding the newly formed AIF before it sailed for the Great War. Promoted to Brigadier General, Rylie was given command of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade which defended the Suez Canal in Egypt against Ottoman incursions, then fought dismounted on Gallipoli, where his men held the southernmost defences at Anzac. Wounded twice on Gallipoli, Rylie later led his men across the Sinai desert and took part in the long advance across Palestine and into Jordan. He was awarded the Order of the Nile, Mentioned in

---

<sup>10</sup> 'Mrs Seery at Gosford', *The Gosford Times and Wyong District Advocate*, 3.5.17, p. 8

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Piggin, 'Fleming, William Montgomerie (1874-1961)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fleming-william-montgomerie-6190/text10639>, published first in hardcopy 1981, accessed online 8 April 2015

<sup>12</sup> Peter Travers, 'O'Loughlin, James Vincent (1852-1925)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/oloughlin-james-vincent-7905>

<sup>13</sup> Rylie cited in 'Commonwealth Members of Parliament', p. 8. For another example, see 'Major Baird, Welcome Home by State Parliamentarians', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 6.4.17, p. 7

Despatches five times, and commanded the Anzac Mounted Division before returning home to his electorate in 1919.

Ryrie had a long and distinguished military career that would have helped further his political aspirations in the years after the war, but there was at least one New South Wales politician who had risen through the ranks of the pre-war militia, and whose skills and command and leadership experience ended much more than his time in politics. The Liberal member for Armidale, George Braund, commanded the 13th Infantry Regiment on the eve of the First World War, and on the formation of the AIF in August 1914, was appointed commander of the 2nd Battalion. Braund led his men ashore on Gallipoli on 25 April, and for two days held an isolated position atop of Walker's Ridge in the face of growing Turkish resistance. Early on the morning of 4 May, Braund set off to brigade headquarters via a short cut through the scrub. Slightly deaf, he failed to hear a challenge from an Australian sentry who mistook him for a Turk and killed him.<sup>14</sup>

Larkin, Fleming, O'Loughlin and Ryrie all equated war service with an unwavering loyalty to the British Empire, but in South Australia, Australia's entry into the war affected the careers of a number of political figures in very different way. Germans were the largest non-British group of Europeans in Australia at the time, and reflecting the large population of German migrants that settled in South Australia in the nineteenth century, there were at least seven South Australian MPs of identifiably German descent in parliament when Britain and the dominions went to war with their homeland.

All seven members (five Liberal and two Labor) came under intense public scrutiny at a time when Germans and all things German were openly subjected to hostility. As rumours of atrocity stories from the fighting in northern France and Belgium filtered home, locals directed their anger at some of the state's most respected German citizens. Among them was the Attorney-General and Industry Minister, Hermann Homburg, whose offices in Adelaide were raided after war was

---

<sup>14</sup> Darryl McIntyre, 'Braund, George Frederick (1866–1915)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/braund-george-frederick-5340/text9027>

declared by soldiers armed with rifles and fixed bayonets. Homburg resigned in January 1915 to avoid embarrassing the government in the forthcoming election, writing of a campaign 'of lies and calumnies against me ... because I am not of British lineage'.<sup>15</sup> The German MPs were considered something of an electoral handicap when the state government lost the election, and mistrust intensified the following year when it was clear that voters in German districts had contributed to South Australia's rejection of conscription at the 1916 referendum. The war gravely affected the political careers of those German MPs holding office in South Australia, with just one of the seven remaining in parliament by November 1918.<sup>16</sup>

After Gallipoli, the AIF returned to Egypt where it effectively doubled in size in preparation for the fighting on the Western Front. As soon as the AIF arrived in France in mid-1916, the main challenge facing Australians was matching casualties with a steady stream of willing volunteers. Eight months of fighting on Gallipoli had cost the AIF 26,000 casualties, which it lost in *eight weeks* in France in costly actions at Fromelles, Pozières and Mouquet Farm.

In Australia, state based recruiting committees increased their efforts in urging young men to enlist in the AIF, and certainly local members used public meetings and gatherings to urge the men of their electorate to volunteer. Some lead by example, such as Ambrose Carmichael, the Labor member of Leichhardt and Minister for Public Instruction in the New South Wales Parliament, who signed on as soon as the extended age requirement permitted him to do so. In November 1915, Carmichael announced he would personally 'raise a thousand reserve recruits' from the rifle clubs of New South Wales. Enlisting as a private at the age of 44, Carmichael and his willing volunteers entered Broadmeadow Camp in Newcastle where they formed the basis of the newly-raised 36th Battalion – a unit that colloquially became known as "Carmichael's Thousand".

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian Harmstorf, 'Homburg, Herman Robert (1874-1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/homburg-hermann-robert-7069>

<sup>16</sup> Jenny Tilby Stock, 'South Australia's German MPs in World War I – The Limits of Tolerance', p. 7;

Carmichael was eventually commissioned as a Lieutenant and embarked with the battalion for the training camps in England before proceeding to the Western Front in November 1916. As part of the 3rd Division, the 36th Battalion spent the following six months in relatively quiet Houplines sector near the town of Armentières, where it carried out a regimen of patrolling and trench raiding throughout the ensuing winter. In January 1917, Carmichael was seriously wounded in the face and hands when a German raiding party attacked the Australian positions and was evacuated to England for treatment and recovery. For conspicuous gallantry in organising his platoon under heavy German bombardment, and for 'setting a splendid example of courage and determination', Ambrose Carmichael was awarded the Military Cross.

Carmichael missed the fighting at Messines, but he was promoted to captain and rejoined his unit in Belgium in time to participate in the Third Battle of Ypres. He was wounded a second time at Broodseinde on 4 October, receiving gunshot wounds to his arms and legs which necessitated his evacuation to England and repatriation to Australia in January 1918. Carmichael was a strong advocate of conscription, but his return to Australia in the wake of the defeat of the second conscription referendum led him to appeal for another 'great sustained recruiting campaign' as voluntary enlistments for the AIF plummeted to an all-time low. He was not expelled from the Labor party after the split over conscription, but he gradually drifted from the party as he invested all his energy in stimulating voluntary recruiting. In February 1918, Carmichael became the chairman of the New South Wales Recruiting Committee, raising yet another "Carmichael's Thousand" and returning to France with a reinforcement group for the 33rd Battalion in September 1918. He arrived just several weeks before the armistice was signed, and did not see any further fighting.

Carmichael returned to Australia and state politics where he was revered as something of 'an over-age and mercurial war hero', but his energy and personal sense of conviction in believing in the cause for which he himself had fought was shared by at least one other state politician who had enlisted in the latter stages of



the war.<sup>17</sup> Bartholomew Stubbs, the Labor member for Subiaco in the West Australian Legislative Assembly, enlisted as soon as the eligibility requirements permitted, signing on in Perth at the age of 43 in January 1916. As a member of the West Australian Recruiting Committee, Stubbs had publicly voiced his beliefs about the justice in the Allied cause and had spoken at a number of recruiting platforms in the Subiaco area, but believed leading by example was best course of action. To reporters of *The Daily News*, Stubbs urged ‘middle-aged men without children or other ties, or whose children have grown up, [to] volunteer before the young married men’.<sup>18</sup>

After a period of training at Blackboy Hill east of Perth and the Royal Military Academy Duntroon, Stubbs was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and embarked for the Western Front with a reinforcement group for 51st Battalion. In Flanders in early August, he sent a cablegram confirming he would run again as the Labor candidate in the upcoming West Australian State election, and on 12 September retained the Subiaco seat unopposed. Two weeks later, Stubbs was shot in the chest and killed during the AIF’s highly successful attack at Polygon Wood near the Belgian town of Ypres. According to an account written eighteen years after the war, the loss of such a popular commander resulted in soldiers of his platoon seeking battlefield justice on a group of surrendering German soldiers whose pleas for mercy were swiftly ignored.<sup>19</sup> Stubbs was given a hasty battlefield burial by his men, but the location of his temporary grave marker was lost in subsequent fighting. Stubbs therefore has no known grave, and is today commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres amid the names 6,100 Australians who remain missing from the fighting in Belgium.

Commenting on the makeup of Australian politics in the decades after the war, Chris Coulthard-Clark writes that the First World War was something of a catalyst for a military influx into state and federal politics. The divisive issues such as

---

<sup>17</sup> Bede Nairn, ‘Carmichael, Ambrose Campbell (1866-1953)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/carmichael-ambrose-campbell-5506>

<sup>18</sup> ‘Another Laborite’, *The Daily News*, 31.1.16, p. 6

<sup>19</sup> ‘The 51st “Over There”’, *Western Mail*, 20.8.36, p.9

conscription, inflation, wage freezing and export embargoes had the effect of hardening political views in Australian society, and caused a number of returned servicemen to enter politics before the Armistice. Throughout the 1920s, men who had risen through the ranks of the AIF, occupied command positions or were highly decorated during the war were naturally drawn to a career in politics. Victoria Cross recipients Lieutenant Arthur Blackburn and Private William Currey both entered state politics on their return to Australia, as did General Sir William Glasgow, Major Generals Sir Neville-Howse and Sir John Gellibrand, Brigadier General Harold “Pompey” Elliott and Colonel Edmund Drake-Brockman.

Some rose to prominence after their war service. Wilfrid Kent Hughes, Cabinet Secretary and Government Whip in the Victorian Legislative Assembly in the late 1920s, served with the 3rd Light Horse Regiment on Gallipoli where he was wounded at the charge at The Nek in August 1915. Serving again during the Second World War, he was captured by the Japanese at Singapore in February 1942, and spent three years imprisoned at Changi, Formosa and Manchuria. Thomas White, the Minister for Trade and Customs in the first Lyons Ministry, had been a pilot in the Australian Flying Corps. Brought down over Mesopotamia in 1915, White spent three years a prisoner of the Turks, and was the only Australian to escape Ottoman captivity. Another was Jim Fairbairn, the Minister for Civil Aviation in the second Menzies Ministry, who had served as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps in the Great War. Fairbairn was brought down near Cambrai in February 1917 when his aircraft was set upon by a *Jasta* of German scouts. With his arm and aircraft shredded by machine-gun fire, and his face badly burned, Fairbairn crash-landed on the other side of No Man’s Land and spent the following twelve months in a German prison camp.

At least one-third of senators and members in federal politics in the late 1940s were First World War veterans, but it is important to recognise that the conflict also shaped the lives of some of Australia’s first female politicians. Although Australian women had the right to vote and be nominated for federal election in 1903, and some had the right to stand in the legislative assembly by 1914, it was not

until after the First World War that the first female members of parliament were elected. A strong advocate of the suffrage movement and women's rights and welfare, Edith Cowan was the first woman elected to an Australian parliament after her victory in the Western Australian election in 1920. During the war years, Cowan worked for a number of patriotic and humanitarian aid organizations, which included the Australian Red Cross Society, for which she helped with fundraising and starting up the Welcome Home for returned soldiers. For this, Cowan was awarded an OBE after the war, but during it, she was an ardent pro-conscription campaigner and an active member of the Perth Recruiting Committee. Red Cross work played a crucial role in involving women in the war effort and in public life, but the war also had a profound impact on women like Ivy Weber, the first woman elected at a general election in Victoria, whose war years were spent maintaining family and home. Long before she entered politics in the 1930s, Weber received the devastating news that her husband, Lieutenant Thomas Mitchell of the 59th Battalion, had been killed in action at Bapaume.

Just like any other community in Australia at the time, the First World War had a significant impact on the personal and private lives of a number of state and federal politicians whose sense of loyalty, duty and patriotism led them to become active participants in it. Some led by example, not wanting to hide behind the excuse of public position to shirk their duty and do what many political figures were expecting of other men, while others, with extensive experience in raising, training and commanding soldiers, helped raise a voluntary army that served with distinction on Gallipoli, in Sinai-Palestine and the Western Front.

Perhaps one of the reasons why their story remains little known is the fact that no one memorial recognises the service and sacrifice made by both state and federal MPs during the First World War. The three serving MPs who died in the First World War are commemorated on the bronze cloisters of the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial, alongside 102,000 Australian men and women who died on active service since before the Boer War. But they appear without distinction, rank or profession pointing to the very unique community to which they belonged.

One of the few sites of commemoration is a small tablet to Ted Larkin and George Braund in the New South Wales Parliamentary chamber, which was unveiled in November 1915 and is still there today. The inscription thereon reminds us that the First World War had a significant impact on the lives of all Australians, which included those in public office. "In time of Peace they readily asserted the rights of citizenship. In time of the war, they fiercely protected them".