

MEMBERS WHO SERVED

First World War



Serving their country

119 Commonwealth members of parliament are identified as having served during the First World War.¹

Australia had been a nation for only 13 years when the War began; and the Commonwealth Parliament was half the size it is today (the House of Representatives had 75 members and the Senate 36—all of whom were men).

The average age of those elected to Parliament at the time was 45.3 years.

Initially entry requirements for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were strict: volunteers needed to be aged 18–35 and physically fit.² Around 33% of all volunteers were rejected during the first year of the war. However, this changed as enlistments declined and casualties increased; from mid-1915 the maximum age was increased to 45 and minimum physical requirements were lowered (and relaxed further in 1916).

As historian Bill Gammage has remarked, volunteers for the AIF had ‘a thousand personal and particular reasons for enlistment’: for some, a sense of adventure, for others, the lure of employment, and, for many, an unquestioned sense of duty to fight for King and country. However, the ‘few who were already MPs when war broke out seem to have felt a pressure from the wider society that was unique to them, and their circumstances, although the advanced age of many politicians limited the number who could seriously consider enlisting.

These pressures were more sharply felt as the casualties mounted and sustaining a volunteer force became increasingly difficult. Unable to convince the Parliament to legislate for conscription, in 1916 Prime Minister Hughes sought a public mandate to

expand the government’s powers for conscription, from the narrow purposes of home defence to the additional role of overseas service. After the referendum was narrowly defeated, Hughes and other conscriptionists left the Labor Party and merged with the Commonwealth Liberal Party to form a new Nationalist Party government. With volunteer enlistment continuing to lag, he put a second referendum to the Australian people in December 1917. Again the nation voted no. However, the issue was hugely divisive and, as historian Joan Beaumont has remarked:

Suffice to say that they were debates which were fought out not simply in Parliament but in streets and public venues throughout the nation. The discussions had an emotional intensity and intellectual sophistication which we scarcely see in political debate today. At issue was not simply whether conscription was needed militarily. There was a deep clash of principles about the obligations of citizenship, the equality of sacrifice in times of national crisis, and the exercise of power by the Australian State. All of this was fuelled by an explosive mix of anxieties: about the demographic implications of denuding the country of its fittest and best men, about military compulsion paving the way for industrial conscription, and about soldiers being replaced in the workforce by women or cheap Asian labour. Civil libertarians meanwhile questioned the morality of the state’s compelling individuals to kill and the heavy-handed use of the War Precautions Act by the Hughes Government. The debate was also infused with a noxious sectarianism as Catholics, who constituted 22 per cent of the Australian population and were mostly working class and of Irish extraction, were radicalised by declining standards of living and the ruthless suppression by the British of the Easter uprising in Dublin.



Parliamentary Library 2015

1. This figure does not include reservists or members in the AIF not in active service (not appearing on the Australian War Memorial’s Embarkation Roll database).
2. ‘Enlistment Standards: First World War’, Australian War Memorial website.
3. Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1974 (1985 edn), p. 10.
4. Martin Lumb, Scott Bennett and John Moremon, ‘Commonwealth Members of Parliament who have served in war’, Parliamentary Library Research Brief, March 2007, p. 7.
5. Joan Beaumont, *Going to war 1914–18: the view from the Australian Parliament*, Parliamentary Library lecture, 19 March 2014.
• Hurley, Frank, 1914–1918, Australian troops resting during World War I, National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn6298449
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