

Going to war 1914-18: The view from the Australian Parliament

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The past, it has been said, is a foreign country and one of the challenges of imagination that we face as we commemorate the centenary of the war is to remember the world of 1914 as it was then, not as we choose to recall it now. Today's Western democracies – materialistic, individualistic, post-modern and intolerant of mass casualties – have such radically different value systems and social mores that we struggle to understand the stoicism and patriotism that allowed Australians a century ago to accept casualties on an almost unimaginable scale.

Today I will be exploring the “foreignness” of the past by looking at the landscape of the political party system and the Federal Parliament that governed Australia during World War I. What role did they play in the national response to this crisis and how were they changed by it?

Let me start by sketching the political scene of 1914. The federation, of course, had been formed only in 1901 and the balance between the power of the Commonwealth and the states was strongly in favour of the states. The political party system was also in its infancy. In the first years after federation there had been a series of short-lived coalitions between political groupings, none of which could govern in its own right. On the conservative side of politics there was a major fault line along the question of free trade versus protectionism; but as the power of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) grew nationally, the non-Labor forces responded by forming what was called a fusion, the Liberal Party, in 1909.

The ALP had emerged from the trade union movement in response to the economic depression of the 1890s and a series of bitter strikes and lockouts in the years before the war. Trade union membership in 1914 was high at about half a million (the total population in 1911 was 4.3 million) and this powerful industrial movement dominated the ALP at the local branch level. At the federal level Labor formed minority or majority governments three times before 1914 and when war broke out was in power in three of the six States: New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia.

Electoral success, however, created tensions between the political and industrial labour movements. Essentially the question was whether Labor should use political power to improve worker conditions by ‘civilising’ rather than destroying capitalism? Should the workers rely on the new system of arbitration or should they pursue change through the ‘direct’ action of the strike, as the syndicalist and anarchist elements of the movement advocated? These tensions, simmering within the labour movement in 1914, would intensify under the pressures of war.

The year 1914 began with the Liberals in power, but only by the slimmest of majorities: 38 seats in the Representatives to 37 ALP. In the Senate, where there were six seats per State, their position was far

worse. (The Parliament was meeting in Melbourne, not Canberra, and one of the first decisions of the Parliament after war was declared was to defer the designing of a new parliament house).

Frustrated by the constraints of the parliamentary numbers, the Liberal leader Joseph Cook convinced the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Crauford Munro Ferguson, that there should be a double dissolution. Munro Ferguson, it should be noted, was a man who took his vice-regal responsibilities very seriously. A Scottish peer and a former British politician he was the channel through whom all communication from the Australian Government was directed to London via the Colonial Office.

The Federal Parliament was prorogued for the election late in July 1914. This meant that it was not in session when the diplomatic crisis following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian dynasty, spiralled out of control after the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July. Nor was Parliament in session when Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August.

This probably did not make much difference. For one thing, the decision to take Australia into World War I was made in London, not in Melbourne. In the Constitution of 1901 the new Federal Government had been given power over what was called “external affairs”, but it was not entirely clear what this meant. In practice, Australia (like the other Dominions, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa) accepted that London had the right to make foreign policy on behalf of the whole empire. This did not mean that Australians thought their interests were always identical to those of Britain. The fact that Britain had formed an alliance with Japan, the growing regional power, in 1902, for example, was a source of great unease to Australians. The Dominion leaders had also extracted an undertaking from London at the Imperial Conference of 1911 that it would consult with the Dominions in the making of imperial foreign policy.

In fact, London did not do this during the crisis of July 1914. But again this did not matter. Even before the British had declared war, on behalf of the whole Empire, Munro Ferguson prompted Cook to call his Cabinet together to discuss what Australia’s response to the coming war would be. The Cabinet was small: only ten members and most of them were out on the election trail. There was, of course, no air travel at that stage, the roads were poor and there was no transcontinental railway. Hence only half the Cabinet, five politicians, acting on the advice of senior military and naval figures, made the momentous decisions that would shape Australia’s role in World War I. The five were Cook, his Attorney-General William Irvine, the Minister for Defence, one Senator Millen, the vice-President of the Executive Council and an honorary minister. Four of the five (I cannot find information about one) had been born in the British Isles. Two of the key portfolios were absent from the Cabinet meeting: the Minister for External (or Foreign) Affairs and the Treasurer (Sir John Forrest, one of the grand old men of Australian politics was campaigning in Western Australia).

These five men decided, firstly, to put the recently created Royal Australian Navy under the control of the Royal Navy. This was no surprise since all pre-war planning had assumed the forces would be integrated in a time of war. But, far more importantly, the Cabinet also decided to raise a force of 20,000 volunteers for an infantry force which Britain could deploy as it wished. Moreover, it committed

Australia to pay the costs of maintaining this force. With this decision, what was to become the Australian Imperial Force of over 330 000 men (fifteen times the original commitment) was born.

Cook was very confident that he would get the support of Parliament for these decisions. The leader of the ALP Opposition, Andrew Fisher, had already committed himself unreservedly during the election campaign to the imperial cause. Indeed, Fisher had uttered on 31 July perhaps the most famous of all the pre-war commitments of support to the British Empire: "Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and last shilling". Fisher's senior colleague W M. (Billy) Hughes was even more passionately an imperial loyalist. He actually proposed in the interests of national unity that the election should be declared off, like a football game. His idea was that the proclamation dissolving Parliament could be revoked or that each party should agree not to oppose sitting candidates, thus ensuring continuity of government. It was a maverick idea, and no one, including Fisher, took it seriously.

The election therefore proceeded and resulted in a victory on 5 September for the ALP: 42 seats to the Liberals 32. In the Senate it was a wipe-out: 31 ALP to 5 Liberals. Fisher became Prime Minister and Hughes, Attorney-General. Fisher, it turned out, for all his credentials, did not find being a war leader much to his taste, and he would resign in 1915 to become high commissioner in London (and ultimately succumb to dementia). Hughes became Prime Minister in October 1915.

As anticipated, when the new parliament met, in early October 1914 (by which time all the plans for a quick victory in Europe were in tatters), there was bipartisan support for the war effort. But outside the parliament, ominously, elements of the labour movement were already showing signs of dissent. As the radical left saw it, the real war was between labour and capital, and the only people who would benefit from slaughter and carnage would be the businessmen, characterised in left-wing cartoons as the bloated plutocrat. This position was not simply ideological: the war rapidly disrupted Australian trade, leading to increased unemployment, and soon price inflation had eroded the value of wages. The price of essential commodities would be a running sore in Australian political life throughout the war.

The Governor General's speech for the new parliament listed an agenda which included a carry-over of pre-war Labor policies for social welfare and national development: proposals such as the unification of railway gauges and increases in old age and invalid pensions. But these soon were swept away on the tide of war and the Parliament focused on war-related issues. Primary among these was the issue of how to fund Australia's military commitment, the costs of which rapidly spun out of control. The total cost of the war, including repatriation and pensions, would eventually be calculated in 1934 as some £831 million. Initially the Fisher Government hoped to finance the war through revenue; and in its first budget it increased the rate of land tax and introduced federal inheritance duties and customs tariffs. But in 1914-15 war expenditure was almost 25 per cent higher than projected revenue, and since the the Federal Government had limited taxation powers (particularly over income tax), it had to turned other sources, including war loans from the British Government and funds raised on the London money market.

The problem here was that while the British Government was willing to assist in giving loans for war expenditure, it was far less keen about lending for capital works. How, it asked, could the Commonwealth Government expect to raise an army by voluntary means if it were also spending millions

on public works which would give employment to the thousands of men who ought to enlist? Loans for capital works was an issue at both federal and state levels. The Federal Government wanted, for example, to continue building the transcontinental railway which had begun in 1912 (in part for defence purposes). The state governments meanwhile were also borrowers of international capital and relied on capital works for local economic development and their electoral popularity.

The conundrum was partially resolved when in March 1915 the British agreed to allow the Dominions to borrow in the open market such sums as were needed to complete works under construction (though not to start new capital works). The Federal Government also in late 1915 managed to persuade the state governments, with the exception of New South Wales, to allow overseas public borrowing to be conducted through the Commonwealth.

Another source of funding of the war effort was loans from the public. In July 1915 the Parliament launched the first of what were to be seven war loans. Ultimately some £250.2 million was raised via this means. For the seventh loan practically one in every four households contributed. Another £7.4 million was raised from war savings certificates issued in 1917.

The second major item on the parliamentary agenda was internal security: how to ensure that the war effort on the home front was not undermined by subversion and dissent? By the end of October 1914 the Government had rushed through a piece of legislation that would become notorious, the *War Precautions Act*. This Act gave the executive branch of government the power to govern by decree through regulations 'for securing the public safety and defence of the Commonwealth'. The passage of emergency powers during wartime was not especially remarkable, but in practice it gave the executive extraordinary discretion and arbitrary power. When Hughes became Prime Minister in late 1915 he would exploit the *War Precautions Act* not just for purposes of waging the war but for political advantage. The Act was amended several times and its regulations constantly increased until there were more than a hundred regulations imposing restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. Once when the Solicitor General Robert Garran was asked, "Would it be an offence under the *War Precautions Act*?" he simply cut the questioner off with "Yes".

One of the initial purposes of the *War Precautions Act* was to control enemy aliens: that is, Australians of German or Austrian birth. The 1911 census identified over 32 000 residents who had been born in Germany and more than 2700 born in Austria-Hungary. There were also 74 508 Lutherans, a denominational affiliation that suggested German descent. It seemed reasonable to assume that some of these residents might pose security risks, given their potentially conflicting loyalties. Hence, as soon as war began, enemy aliens were forced to register with the police, while German clubs and consulates were threatened by riotous crowds in the capital cities. Progressively these individuals were forced out of employment, their businesses were shunned and the Government began a process of internment. By May 1916 even people who had been 'naturalised', or who were born in Australia, but of enemy fathers or grandfathers, were caught in the net. Ultimately some 6 890 persons were to be interned in what was in many respects an arbitrary, capricious process as local authorities interpreted the regulations of the *War Precautions Act* as their saw fit.

Given the abuse of the *War Precautions Act* we might ask why it passed through Parliament so easily. Some parliamentarians were in fact nervous about its potential to introduce 'something like martial law' and the Member of Parliament for the South Australian seat of Angus, which included the German district of the Barossa Valley, questioned the clause which allowed the Government to deem naturalised Australians as aliens. Yet these reservations dissipated before the pervasive sense of crisis, much as reservations about greater government surveillance of the citizenry did in the aftermath of 9/11. Parliamentarians seem to have been reassured by the argument of Irvine that 'In time of war Governments do ... many things not authorised by law' and Hughes' assurance that the Government would use the new powers as sparingly as possible. The ease with which civil rights were surrendered is a salutary lesson for anyone concerned about individual privacy today.

A third concern of the Parliament was eliminating trade with the enemy. No sooner had the war begun than the British Government started employing its historic weapon of blockade, listing many goods as contraband. In October 1914 Parliament followed with the Trading with the Enemy Act, which prohibited trading with companies controlled by enemy nationals. From this base Hughes, for whom eliminating any trade with Germany, not only during but also after the war, became an obsession, moved to gain control of the German firms which dominated the important base metals industry, particularly lead, zinc and copper. As Hughes saw it, these firms were a 'great German octopus' whose tentacles gripped the Australian metal trade. By May 1915 the *Enemy Contracts Annulment Act* was passed, allowing contracts with enemy companies to be cancelled. What constituted an enemy contract was a matter for the Attorney-General to determine. Then, in the face of considerable industry opposition, Hughes established an Australian Metal Exchange which asserted Commonwealth control over the treatment and sale of Australian metals. Local companies were the beneficiaries. In April 1915 BHP opened steelworks in Newcastle and a zinc refinery was later established in Tasmania.

In this sense the war was not all loss for Australia, but the story was very different in human terms. It was clear, even before Australian forces were deployed at Gallipoli, that there would be mass deaths and injuries, and that many families would be left without a breadwinner. The first wounded arrived home shortly after the Gallipoli landing of 25 April 1915, (among them were some VD sufferers who were quickly hurried away). In anticipation of the needs of the returned soldiers, Parliament had already passed the *War Pensions Act* in late November 1914. Progressively more and more resources were poured into what became known colloquially as Repatriation or the 'Repat'. This had bipartisan support. In July 1915 a Federal Parliamentary War Committee (FPWC) was established with members from across the political parties. Its primary role and that of the network of War Councils it established in each state, was to coordinate recruitment efforts; but the FPWC was also assigned the role of integrating Commonwealth and state government initiatives to provide employment, medical care and land settlement schemes for returning soldiers.

What needs to be stressed is that, for the Australian authorities, repatriation benefits and recruitment were two sides of the one coin. How could men be persuaded to volunteer if they feared that they and their families were to be left destitute in the event of their death or injury?

As the establishment of the FPWC indicates, by mid-1915 recruitment for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was becoming the dominant issue in Australian politics. Men had flocked to enlist in the first months of the war. The original promise to Britain of 20 000 volunteers was met within a matter of weeks and by the end of 1914 more than 50 000 had enlisted. Recruitment continued at acceptable rates in early 2015 and then surged in mid-1915: partly in response to the news of Gallipoli; partly because the federal and state governments started at last to launch much more systematic recruitment campaigns. But the gap between enlistments and casualties continued to grow in late 1915 and from then on enlistments never kept pace with losses at the front.

This gap triggered what must be the most divisive debate in Australian political history: the debate about conscription for overseas service. This debate actually began soon after the Gallipoli landing in 1915, though it did not come to a head until late 1916. The conservative forces started to lobby for conscription not simply because they thought it was needed militarily but because, as they saw it, all citizens had a duty to serve in defence of the nation and empire. For his part, Fisher would not consider conscription, but Hughes was a different matter. His political base was the trade union movement and he saw no problems with compulsion in the form of the closed shop.

However, the wider labour movement was profoundly divided on the issue. Hence legislation introducing conscription might not pass, even though there was a Labor majority in both houses. Legislation, I need to explain, was required because the *Defence Act* of 1903 had created only a small regular army which could not be deployed on overseas service. A compulsory military service scheme had been introduced in 1911, with Labor's support, but this was for home defence only. The AIF therefore from its initiation had been a volunteer force only.

The first step that Hughes took, therefore, while still Attorney-General, was to pass the War Census Act. The census that followed required Australian males between the age of 18 and 60 years to complete questionnaires about their age, occupation, amount of military training and state of health. In deference to the demand from the left for a 'conscription of wealth', the Census also asked questions about personal wealth, including assets, property and income. Hughes gave assurances that the census was not a forerunner to conscription, but those who suspected foul play were hardly reassured by the fact that the War Census included the following questions:

1. Are you willing to enlist now? Reply "Yes" or "No".
2. If you reply "Yes", you will be given a fortnight's notice before being called up.
3. If not willing to enlist now, are you willing to enlist at a later date? Reply "Yes" or "No" and if willing, state when.
4. If not willing to enlist, state the reason why, as explicitly as possible.

The issue of conscription was kept under control, but only just, while Hughes was away from Australia lobbying in London for the first half of 1916 (interestingly he was away for around six months, a prime ministerial absence it is hard to imagine today!). On his return in August 1916, the issue of conscription exploded. By this time Australian forces had suffered 23 000 casualties in 42 days in the

Battle of the Somme, while Britain and New Zealand had both introduced conscription earlier in 1916. Hughes thought Australia had to follow suit. But his options were limited. He could risk introducing legislation and the Governor General had promised to dissolve the Representatives if it failed to pass the bill. But everyone told him that this would split the labour caucus apart (as it did). Hughes thought about issuing a regulation under the *War Precautions Act* but this would have required the concurrence of the Executive Council (which was essentially his Cabinet) and the Senate would have disallowed it. Anyway, the Chief Justice Sir Samuel Griffith advised Hughes that this would be unconstitutional. So Hughes decided to put the vote to the people.

I do not have time today to tell the full story of the conscription referendum of October 1916, and the one that followed in December 1917. 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.

In the event, conscription was narrowly defeated in October 1916, which, given the harassment of anti-conscriptionists and the heavy handed censorship by the Government, was a testament to the power of grass-roots politics and the left-wing press. One of the great unsung heroes of the war, from my perspective, is Henry Boote, the editor of *The Australian Worker*, whose brilliant and scaremongering journalism must have inspired many an Australian to vote No.

The impact of the first conscription referendum on the political landscape was dramatic and immediate. Even before the vote was taken, Hughes' Cabinet had split (over his using his existing emergency powers to call up men, purportedly for home defence but assuming the vote would be Yes). Hughes was also expelled from the NSW branch of the labour movement, his political base. Then in November, as the federal caucus prepared to cast a vote of no confidence, Hughes stopped the debate, left the room and called on "those who think with me to follow me". Twenty-four Labour parliamentarians did.

Those left behind probably thought they would form a government but they had misjudged their man. Hughes and his group of defectors met excitedly in the Senate club room and agreed to create a new political party, the National Labor Party. A new Cabinet was stitched together and late that night with the support of Munro Ferguson, Hughes formed a new government, anticipating correctly that he would get

the support of the Liberal Opposition. Two months later after prolonged jostling for position, Hughes's new Labour and the Liberals formed a new coalition, the Nationalists.

Hughes would lead this coalition to the polls in May 1917 where he won a handsome majority on a Win the War ticket. In the Representatives Nationalists held 53 seats to 22 for the ALP. The Senate election later that year resulted in the Nationalists winning 24 seats, the ALP 12. The vote against conscription, it turned out, had not been a vote against the war, and the Nationalists were able to demonise the ALP as 'disloyal', much as the Menzies Governments of the 1950s were able to stigmatise opponents by imputing that they were soft on communism. In essence the ALP, which in 1914 had the potential to dominate Australian politics, was pushed to the margins of federal politics (though less so at the state level) not only during the war years but for two decades thereafter.

Some historians see World War I therefore as the loss of the reforming urge and innovation in politics. My colleague Marilyn Lake will be giving a keynote speech at a forthcoming conference entitled "1914 The Death of a Nation". This may seem an overstatement, but the legislative record for 1917 and 1918 speaks to a narrow preoccupation with the war: supply, war loans, preferential employment for returned soldiers, pensions, taxation: these dominant the parliamentary agenda in the last years of the war. Legislation also included what must count as one of the most anti-liberal Acts ever passed by the Federal Parliament, the *Unlawful Associations Act* of December 1916, which was amended in July 1917. Aimed at destroying one of Hughes' *bête noires*, the Industrial Workers of the World, this Act proscribed any organisation that was hostile to the war. Even being a member of such organisations was an offence after mid-1917.

It is notable also that in the last year of the war, Parliament played no role in shaping the post-war settlement. By this time the British Government had conceded that the Dominions should be consulted more about imperial affairs and have a more visible role in international diplomacy. The practice whereby all communications were channelled through the Governor-General was clearly anachronistic and was scrapped in favour of Dominion prime ministers being able to communicate with their British counterpart on matters of cabinet importance. Australia and the other Dominions were also given the right to independent representation at the Paris Peace Conference. But these were matters handled almost exclusively by Hughes. Much to the increasing irritation of his colleagues he referred matters to his Cabinet and Parliament, and took its advice from them, only when it suited him. While Hughes revelled in aggressively tackling the British Prime Minister Lloyd George and the US President Woodrow Wilson, many in Australia were embarrassed and uneasy about the way he was straining the very imperial relationship that Australia had gone to war to preserve. By 1918–19, it seemed that Hughes did not speak for Australia, as diplomatic convention assumes a prime minister does.

In conclusion, then, this helicopter view of the war suggests that the role of the Federal Parliament progressively became less significant as the war continued. Of course the Parliament had never had any say over the most critical issue, the operational deployment of Australian troops. Nor, it should be said, did the Australian Cabinet. This was left in the hands of the British. Major battles such as Gallipoli, the Somme and the 3rd Ypres were launched without Hughes' prior knowledge. Not until 1918, after the disaster of the German breakthrough in March, did Hughes challenge British military authorities about its use of the

AIF. Meanwhile, the responsibility for the political and economic relationship with the United Kingdom was to a large degree monopolised by Hughes. Having acquiesced in the heat of the early days of war to the passage of the *War Precautions Act*, the Parliament watched as the powers of the executive branch of government increased to a point that many saw as excessive.

More generally, the shattering and reconfiguration of the political party system during the conscription crisis of 1916-17 resulted in a significant shift to the right in federal politics that would last for a generation. Try as I might as I wrote *Broken Nation: Australians and the Great War*, I could not find much positive to say about the impact of World War I on Australian politics and society. Nor could I dispel the impression that the war left Australians inward-looking, almost xenophobic, traumatised by grief and deeply divided by the political rancour over conscription and the inequality of sacrifice. However, if the current commemorative plans for 2014-18 are any indication, it seems unlikely that it is this legacy of the war that will be remembered nationally.