

'We cannot fight forever': Australia, the First World War and the question of commitment

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The casual observer of Australia's centenary of ANZAC commemorations might conclude that World War I was a unifying experience, a conflict that forged a confident and cohesive nation within a victorious empire. Gallipoli has been understood as a foundational story, the butchery on the Western Front as an expression of national mettle, and the victories of 1918 as a demonstration of Australian achievement before the eyes of an admiring world. Yet World War I was arguably the most divisive period in Australia's history, as the country was ripped apart by the conscription crises of 1916 and 1917, and the general strike, dividing along the lines of social class, religious affiliation and political and industrial allegiance, and according to attitudes concerning nation and empire. By 1918 many Australians were afflicted by grief and war-weariness. The Australian labour movement and Labor Party, having lost interest in materially supporting voluntary recruitment and distant from the main arena of warfare in Europe, wanted a negotiated peace. It is likely that if the war had continued into 1919, the full extent of Australia's flagging enthusiasm would soon have been difficult to obscure. The aim of this article is to draw attention to this alternative history, one long recognised by historians of the Australian home front, yet finding no place in modern ANZAC commemoration.

We cannot fight forever. When the domes
Of Truth's forsaken temple surely gleam
Above wrecked churches, and black ruined homes
Men shall forsake the battle for the dream.
Furnley Maurice (Frank Wilmot), To God: From the Weary
Nations, 1917¹

At the end of the centenary of the First World War, the lustre of ANZAC in Australian culture seemingly remains untarnished. When in August 2018, a Fairfax media article made a series of allegations against the celebrated Victoria Cross winner, Ben Roberts-Smith, largely concerned with his service in Afghanistan but also touching on aspects of his private life, the Director of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), Brendan Nelson, quickly turned on the media: 'I have to ask where is the national interest in what's being done here?'²

The details of the allegations are not pertinent here. What matters is Nelson's assumption that what went on in Afghanistan, if it happens to raise difficult questions about someone regarded as a national hero, should stay in Afghanistan. We can be certain, moreover, that Nelson's intervention was not simply an off-the-cuff response, for he had responded similarly to earlier criticisms of Roberts-Smith, aired in a book by the investigative journalist, Chris Masters: 'Where is the national interest in tearing down our heroes?'³

Nelson's condemnation of the media sits comfortably with the place of war in Australian society today, and is additionally a useful reminder of the role of the AWM in that process. History and myth are invariably involved in a dance; they are lovers as well as rivals. But it becomes ever harder to find a real war in the midst of Australian ANZAC propaganda. One of the manoeuvres is to erase the home front; the war occurs in the Dardanelles and Palestine, in Belgium and France, but not in Australia. For today's politicians, wars are fought to make nations and to display Australian virtues and they appear as fundamentally unifying experiences.

But World War One was not unifying. It was arguably the most divisive few years in Australia's history, as the country was torn asunder by the conscription crises and the general strike. By 1918 the country was grief-stricken and exhausted.⁴ The aim of this article is to draw attention to the war as a story of qualified commitment, growing division, and burgeoning disillusionment; a history that finds no place in ANZAC commemoration because it clashes with the dominant images of national purpose, heroic achievement and personal sacrifice that are the major ingredients of modern ANZAC collective remembrance.

Opposition leader, Labor's Andrew Fisher had promised in 1914 that, in the event of a war, Australia would fight

to the last man and the last shilling. But within a few days, he had already added the rider that Australia's first duty was to defend itself; it would offer whatever it had left over as a tribute to the mother country.⁵ One of the fundamental questions about Australia's war had already been set up; how much was enough when Australia itself was not being directly threatened with invasion? While there was an initial rush to enlist, most of the eligible held back for the time being. There was some enthusiasm for war, but also apprehension. Economically, moreover, the war was immediately a dislocating experience. With the disruption of international trade and finance, prices climbed, and so did unemployment.⁶ The government froze wages but lacked the power to do much about prices. After Billy Hughes replaced an exhausted Fisher as prime minister in October 1915, the proposal for a constitutional referendum on prices was abandoned.

By this time, the boost to enlistment that had occurred in the Australian winter of 1915 in the wake of the Gallipoli landing had ended. Hughes spent the first half of 1916 in Europe, where British authorities pressed on him the need for more Australian men. Soon after his return, he was advocating the conscription of men for service overseas, already introduced in Britain in January 1916. But while he had been away, the labour movement had been agitating and organising against conscription. Hughes's efforts to convert the Labor Party failed and, in the absence of sufficient parliamentary numbers to legislate for it, he managed to persuade the federal caucus – after a long debate – to agree to a referendum. Like the recent same-sex marriage survey, it was legally a plebiscite and could only be indicative; it was essentially a public opinion poll, or plebiscite, under a system of voluntary voting (Australia did not compel federal voting until 1924). The campaign that followed was bitter and divisive, and the No case won narrowly. Hughes, an excitable and confrontational figure, ran an ill-judged campaign, even calling up men to train under the *Defence Act* so that they would be ready for despatch overseas when a Yes vote came through. His actions helped turn the Australian Labor Party (ALP) against compulsory military training even for home defence.⁷

Labor split over conscription, with Hughes taking a group of his followers with him out of the party room. He was able to remain prime minister by eventually forming a win-the-war Nationalist Party with his former opponents. Many of them did not much like the old socialist demagogue, but they would tolerate him until the end of 1922. A federal election in May 1917 saw a large swing away from the Labor Party, and Hughes was able to form a government with 54% of the vote and 53 House of Representatives seats in a House of 75. The Nationalist Party now also held 24 Senate seats to Labor's 12. In theory at least, they could now have legislated conscription. But Hughes

had promised that he would not do so without referring the matter to the people, and he knew that any effort to introduce conscription without an expression of popular consent would run into the fierce antagonism of a still powerful union movement. A second conscription vote was set down for 20 December 1917. Hughes's proposal for conscription was this time hedged with all kinds of restrictions and qualifications, but it was once again defeated. If the campaign was less tense, that was only because the result was more predictable. After all that had happened, a Yes vote seemed unlikely and, as it happened, the result was not as close this time round.

There had been an increase in strikes during the war against a background of declining living standards and the general stress of the war. Working-class discontent exploded in mid-1917, however, over a proposal, from the New South Wales Railways to introduce a 'card system' of accounting which unionists interpreted as an attempt to 'speed-up' work practices and decided to oppose. When the commissioners refused to withdraw the proposal, the unions struck. August was a time of bitter conflict, of large demonstrations by workers and their families, of strike-breakers emerging from the countryside, the private schools and the university, and of escalation as new groups of workers – such as wharfies – refused to handle 'black goods'. In this way, the strike spread interstate; thousands of Melbourne workers were also soon out. Union leaders were arrested; one unionist in Sydney, Mervyn Flanagan, was shot dead by a Bingara farmer and brother of a conservative MP. Women were prominent in the strike demonstrations, sometimes – as in the case of those working in railway refreshment rooms – as strikers themselves.⁸

In early September, 1917 with volunteer or 'scab' labour widely in use, the unions capitulated. The vindictiveness of the authorities was savage; at least a couple of thousand railway workers were not re-employed, and others suffered discrimination and demotion. Company unions were formed; the genuine railway unions were de-registered. Those who had held out were known as the 'Lily-Whites' – the union movement struck a badge in their honour. The rancour between those who had remained true and those who had taken the jobs of strikers and remained in the service continued for years. Future prime minister Ben Chifley, demoted from engine-driver to fireman, recalled that the dispute left 'a legacy of bitterness and a trail of hate'. Joe Cahill, later Labor premier of NSW, was another worker caught up in the strike, as was the young Eddie Ward, later a Labor firebrand.⁹

The extent to which much of the labour movement was by this time alienated from the war is not fully appreciated. Nineteen-seventeen had been a year of turmoil in Russia, with the overthrow of the monarchy early in the year and

the Bolshevik coup on 7 November. The subsequent withdrawal of Russia from the war, and the signing of a treaty with Germany (Brest-Litovsk) in early March, confirmed the worst fears of the Allies. While Russia's exit from the war came at the same time as the United States was ramping up its involvement, there was no reason to imagine at this time that the war would come to an end any time soon.

The idea of a negotiated peace had been debated in Britain, Europe and the United States during 1917. In August, there was Pope Benedict XV's 'Peace Note' and in November, Lord Lansdowne's 'Peace Letter' to the Daily Telegraph in Britain. Lansdowne was neither a pacifist nor defeatist; he had variously served as Secretary of State for War, and for Foreign Affairs, and he led the conservative forces in the House of Lords. Lansdowne had however gradually become less hawkish about the war as his disillusionment with the empty promises of British generals grew. Nineteen-seventeen had provided yet another summer that failed to deliver the much-anticipated 'knock-out blow' that commanders had promised and the politicians – at least until their credulity was stretched too far by repeated disappointment – had believed would deliver unconditional victory. While venom poured on Lansdowne from the press and the politicians, his intervention gave hope to British radicals who desired a revision of war aims in the interests of a negotiated settlement. His letter was also intended to bolster the growing body of moderate opinion in Germany itself; the outbreak of strikes there in January 1918 was indicative of the troubled state of that nation under the strain of war.¹⁰

Those in Britain and France advocating a 'knock-out blow' managed to maintain their ascendancy. They confirmed their determination to fight to the finish at a Supreme War Council meeting at Versailles in early February 1918, which in turn gave a great boost to the most belligerent elements in Germany. The massive German offensive that began on 21 March 1918 ended any possibility of a negotiated peace and by July, their armies had occupied a vast amount of European territory. In retrospect, and notwithstanding the 'Napoleonic fantasies' of the high command, Germany had shown that it could not win the war. Having thrown a vast amount of resources into the effort, victory was still beyond it, and yet 800,000 men – including many crack troops – had been lost.¹¹

Those encountering news of the war back in Australia would not have sniffed victory; this still looked like a 'war without end'.¹² Many political and industrial labour organisations had already expressed support for a negotiated peace in the previous months, when the Labor Party held its seventh national conference in Perth in June 1918.¹³ It called for an international conference, to include

working-class and female representation, and which would arrange 'equitable terms of peace'. The leftward shift of labour movement opinion is also evident in the opening passages of the report of the Labor Party's Peace Committee, which conference adopted unanimously:

That, as the Governments of Europe, founded on class rule and adopting the methods of secret diplomacy, have failed utterly to preserve peace, or to bring the present war within measurable distance of a conclusion, and whereas the existing capitalistic system of production for profit compels every nation constantly to seek new markets to exploit, inevitably leading to a periodic clash of rival interests, we contend that only by an organised system of production for use, under democratic control, can a recurrence of such calamities be permanently avoided. The present system, by fostering commercial rivalry, territorial greed and dynastic ambitions, has created an atmosphere of mutual fear and distrust among the Great Powers, which was the immediate cause of the present colossal struggle.¹⁴

John Percy Jones, a Victorian Labor Party Legislative Councillor, wrote to his old friend Tom Mann, the well-known British socialist and labour leader who had spent several years living in Australia but was now at home, that:

as far as the Australian Labor movement is concerned, you will know that it had definitely declared for peace by negotiation, and in consequence is being very hotly attacked. Probably you also know that the censorship is very rigid in this country, while prosecutions of the 'prejudicial to recruiting' type are pretty rife. Labor here is practically against recruiting, although there is considerable camouflage about the attitude. [Frank] Tudor [Opposition Leader], [William] Maloney [a Victorian member of the House of Representatives] and others appear on recruiting platforms. Most of the members keep off them.¹⁵

The ALP conference also subjected participation in voluntary recruiting to conditions, which included 'a clear and authoritative statement' from the Allies 'asserting their readiness to enter into Peace negotiations, upon the basis of no annexations and no penal indemnities', and an enquiry into Australia's requirements for home defence and industry. The conference – as a compromise between contending factions – resolved to submit the matter of further participation in recruitment to a vote of members of ALP branches and affiliated unions later in the year.¹⁶ (It was saved from having to bring the ballot to a result by the armistice; the party argued that President Woodrow

Wilson's 14 Points were in harmony with ALP policy.) Voluntary enlistment had by this time been reduced to a trickle and Jones was undoubtedly correct that few leading Labor politicians were inclined to do anything to reverse the trend. When asked soon after the Perth conference about his own apparent inactivity despite lending his name to a scheme called the 'Ryan Thousand' aimed at recruitment, Queensland Labor premier T.J. Ryan explained that he had 'refused to become a recruiting agent and to take on my shoulders work that does not properly belong to me'.¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, Labor's political opponents and the mainstream press subjected its policy to some very rough handling. W.A. Watt, the Acting Prime Minister, remarked that 'its poisoned pill will not go down, it sticks in the throat of every decent Australian'.¹⁸ The *Adelaide Advertiser* declared that the policies adopted by the conference were 'permeated by Bolshevik principles' while the *Sydney Morning Herald* thought a 'National party' would 'be necessary as long as Labor provides a refuge for the men who have preached treachery and cowardice and disloyalty, both in Sydney and in Perth'.¹⁹

Government propaganda efforts in the last year of the war registered that public enthusiasm for the war was ebbing away in the face of long casualty lists and few signs of progress. Enlistments dropped over the Australian summer from 2,344 in January 1918, to 1,918 in February, and 1,518 in March. The great German offensive boosted numbers a little, to 2,781 in April and 4,888 in May, but they soon declined again to well under 3,000 before climbing again to 3,619 in October. These numbers did not even approach the target of 5,400 that had been set in March on the advice of former Chief Justice of the High Court, Sir Samuel Griffith, and the problem of numbers was now compounded by the government having initiated a system of 'ANZAC Leave' for men who had joined up in 1914.²⁰ In the face of such 'failure', the government launched an elaborate propaganda campaign that enlisted the artistic talents of Norman Lindsay – most notoriously, in producing a poster depicting the German 'Hun' as a frightful gorilla-man with blood-soaked hands over a globe of the world – and aimed at increasing voluntary recruitment. The war's end intervened before the efficacy of the campaign's posters, pamphlets, press advertisements and film could be fully tested, but the very existence of such an enterprise – and the extreme nature of some of the material – speaks to flagging morale and the government's perception that a remedy was required.²¹

Strikingly, the sixth volume of the First World War Official History – the final volume on the Australian Imperial Force in Gallipoli and France, and the last written by Charles Bean – recognised that Australia had ultimately offered

something less than the last man and last shilling. Bean was not writing specifically of 1918, but it was in relation to the last year of the war that the force of his argument seems most powerful:

The Australian people did not make a total effort; they did not take every step that could have been taken had they felt themselves face to face with the threat of immediate extinction. Like so many other peoples since, a great part of them would recognise that threat only if it came in one form – invasion of their country ... The war efforts of all sovereign states, as of individuals, were a measure not only of their virility, courage, loyalty – or other qualities that make up national morale – but also of their realisation of the direct threat to possessions which that morale would lead them to defend.²²

In other words, Bean was suggesting that a sense of distance from danger ultimately acted as a brake on Australia's war commitment. If so, it is hardly surprising that, as the war moved towards its fourth year, a government led by an erratic prime minister who had twice been unable to muster a majority for conscription should also find the larger task of popular mobilisation increasingly beyond its powers.

Counterfactual history is invariably a dangerous exercise, but it is worth considering what kind of contribution Australia would have been able to offer if the war had extended into 1919 or 1920. Ernest Scott, in his volume of the Official History, provided a rosy picture, rejecting the idea 'that the A.I.F. would have dwindled to insignificant proportions' but conceding that a division would probably have had to be broken up in 1919.²³ But the tide of opinion was changing in Australia by 1918 in a manner that was unlikely to have encouraged buoyant recruitment. As we have seen, Labor, which had always contained a minority opposed to or ambivalent towards the war, was now formally committed to a negotiated peace, and it had signalled only conditional support for voluntary recruitment that, in practice, really amounted to window-dressing for practical withdrawal of involvement. Social divisions – probably involving some degree of violence – would likely to have further opened up in the event of a lengthier war. Religious sectarianism was already rife: 60,000 attended the 1918 St Patrick's Day March in Melbourne, at which Daniel Mannix, the anti-conscriptionist Archbishop of Melbourne, had refused to raise his biretta for the playing of *God Save the King*, but did so to honour the martyrs of the Dublin Easter uprising of 1916. It had been the brutal British suppression of this rebellion that had turned Mannix against conscription, and to some extent against the war itself. His actions predictably provoked a Protestant outcry demanding his prosecution for sedition.²⁴ There was growing paranoia, and not only about Catholics: about

spies, sabotage, and even supposed sightings of German aircraft and submarines.²⁵ The labour movement, already disaffected by rising prices and declining wages, angry at official authoritarianism and repression, and influenced by radical and even revolutionary ideology, was increasingly cynical about whose interests were being served by the war.²⁶ And fear of Japan, which figured across the political spectrum and among various shades of opinion about the war and conscription, might have intensified, placing additional pressure on governments to attend to home defence rather than sending resources to Europe and the Middle East.²⁷ Australia was a fearful, inward-looking place by the end of 1918; it might have been even more so, if the war had extended for much longer.

Perhaps, even if victory had come – as it surely would have done eventually – Australians would recall the war very differently; less in terms of an ANZAC Legend forged at Gallipoli, and the Australian contribution to the victory on the Western Front in 1918. Possibly, the dominant note would have been national exhaustion, even a sense of having let the Allied side down. At any rate, a different history is likely to have shaped a different kind of collective remembering.

The centenary of the last year of the war has spawned a sense of national triumphalism.²⁸ If the centenary of Gallipoli was a celebration of the ordinary soldier as secular saint, the centenary of 1918 has been the year of Monash and 'his' victories in France: a \$100 million 'cutting-edge multimedia' Sir John Monash Centre at Villers-Bretonneux;²⁹ calls for Monash to be posthumously made a Field-Marshal (rejected by the government); even preposterous claims from a former military lawyer and serving Labor politician, Mike Kelly, that Monash's skill as a commander revolutionised modern warfare, saved thousands of Australian lives, and 'ended the war earlier'.³⁰ And with a reminder that no edifice is too extravagant for Australia's ANZAC heroes, the Director of the Australian War Memorial soon chimed in with announcement of a bid for a new tunnel to be constructed under the building – at a possible cost to taxpayers of half a billion dollars – to facilitate expansion of its exhibition space (and, he argued, contribute therapeutically to welfare of returned service personnel).³¹ Australia's spending on the centenary was already approaching \$600 million,³² and so likely greater than the expenditure of all other belligerent nations combined. Yet, the centenary's grand scale was certainly not matched by the quality of historical appraisal or public education. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that the sheer volume of activity in 2015, in particular, induced boredom and ANZAC or 'Gallipoli fatigue'.³³ Public controversies – and therefore public attention – have increasingly been showered on Australia Day, 26 January, with the result that interest in 25 April has flagged. The elisions that modern ANZAC Day has

been promoted to effect – the artful forgetting that it was a war in defence of a White Australia within the British Empire – have in this way returned to haunt Australian commemorative culture, rather as they continue to haunt post-imperial settler society.

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Me. You. Us.

There are twenty-seven young Afghan men
that come to our makeshift school
in the afternoon.

At first I battle to tell them apart;
the Mohammeds, Alis and Ali Rezas.

Today is their third day
the guard brings me three
sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys.
We sit in the demountable
by the whirl of an ancient air conditioner.
On the window painted wire
forms thin bars.

We look at
letter sounds and names
pronouns, proper nouns, conjunctives.
They are struggling
to form the 'n' sound, so I show them
a little self-consciously
how my tongue is positioned
behind my teeth.
The students try,
frown their brows and try again
until the strange task
has us eye to eye, laughing
in one language.

Suddenly they seem so close
the blood and breath of them.
I look toward Ali and see the shape
of his eyebrows
notice the way they thicken then disperse
the gradations of brown in his iris
when lit by the light from the window.

I witness the wounds crudely stitched
that run up Mohammed's arm
until they disappear beneath
his shirt sleeve.
I inhale the warmth of Mussa
his scent of cigarettes, spice and sweat.

The music teacher arrives
with drums, CDs and a whiteboard marker.
Together the students sing,
'I am, you are, we are Australian'.
I turn and quickly leave the room.

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RENEÉ PETTITT-SCHIPP,
WESTERN AUSTRALIA