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### A divided national capital: Melbourne in the Great War

The federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 also marked the inauguration of Melbourne as the first national capital, a status that the city held until the Commonwealth parliament was transferred to Canberra in 1927. Melbourne was the heartland of nationalist sentiment and support for Federation,<sup>1</sup> so it was an appropriate choice as capital, and the grand classical state parliament building at the top end of the city in Spring Street was graciously assigned to the national legislature. Melburnians' sense of the city's significance was confirmed and expanded during the years of the Great War, when the federal government gained in power and prestige at the expense of the state governments. Despite the limitations on the Commonwealth prescribed in the Constitution by assignment of the more extensive residual powers to the states, total war inevitably concentrated the most vital economic, administrative and military powers in the central government. Melbourne became the focal point for interest groups of all kinds and the place where they mainly gathered to lobby, to meet, to confer and to demonstrate. Moreover, peak organisations established in the city, ostensibly to represent local and state interests, came, perforce, to speak for national interests as well. And many explicitly national organisations now found their membership concentrated in the southern capital where civic and national consciousness was further heightened by war.





**THE BURDEN BEARER.**



As a state capital, Melbourne also housed the Victorian parliament (at the Exhibition Building in Nicholson Street), and this sometimes made for divided loyalties and identities, as well as confusion as to the respective responsibilities of the state and national governments. Melburnians had multiple identities: with their suburban communities, and as Victorians, Australians or Britons. Their identities were also defined by class, gender, religion and ethnicity, as well as personal relationships and family. It was not axiomatic that national or imperial identity took precedence; nor did all Melburnians necessarily agree on what such identities might mean. But it was in Melbourne that these questions were most earnestly debated, where a national community was variously imagined and concomitant hopes for its future self-consciously formulated, where the demands of total war were most explicit and their divisive effects on the hopes of a newly conceived nation most evident.

As a dominion and a national capital, Melbourne's status was an ambiguous one, at both centre and periphery of decision-making. As a result, it was not always clear where the national government's first responsibility lay – with the Australian electorate or with the imperial administration – and this was complicated by the fact that power over decisions and actions affecting the local population did not always reside with the Australian Government. The population experienced these limitations on the federal government's power in high casualty rates<sup>2</sup> and rising concern about the seemingly insatiable demand for more soldiers, in the restricted and contradictory information about the progress of the war as well as constraints on freedom of expression, in the continuing problems of lack of shipping and loss of markets, and in shortages and soaring prices of necessities.

Also outside the national government's control were matters that were constitutionally the prerogative of the states but of central importance to material welfare and community aspirations. Nevertheless, expanded Commonwealth powers over taxation, commerce, wages and working conditions, food supply, censorship and civil liberties, not to mention the threat of military conscription, were also of great and increasing significance to daily life and to shaping hopes and fears about the nation's future. These changes in the balance of power were obviously important for all states and their capital cities but, since the national parliament was situated in Melbourne, the issues were more consistently and frequently debated there, and the confusion generated by the existence of multiple authorities was more apparent. In addition, expectations of the national Labor government that was elected a month after the outbreak of war were greater within Melbourne's labour and working-class circles than elsewhere since, unlike the other states,

there had been no viable Labor government in Victoria and no prospects of one in the near future.

Melbourne was a city of just over 600,000 in 1914. It was a manufacturing city in which the main source of employment for men and women was industrial, and its population was distributed largely according to class. Working-class people lived in an arc of suburbs surrounding the central business district, with growth extending to the north and west as factories relocated to bigger premises. The expanding south-eastern suburbs were largely populated by the wealthy, and the professional and middle classes. The first decade of the century saw the city slowly recovering from a devastating depression and was marked by a growing sense of class consciousness and the emergence of political and industrial institutions that reflected the conflicting interests of employers and workers. While the trade union movement expanded rapidly and the Labor Party broke with its former Liberal allies, moving to the left under the influence of the Victorian Socialist Party, the new Victorian Employers' Federation also grew quickly, and political organisation among liberals and conservatives was consolidated. Political organisation among women in part reflected class differences, with the Labor, Socialist and Liberal parties creating women's sections, while the conservative Australian Women's National League, with over 50,000 members by 1914, outdid them all. But some of the new women's organisations, like Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association, were determined to remain non-party aligned, and so too was the National Council of Women of Victoria, an umbrella body representing most women's societies. The Victorian council was the largest of all the state NCWs in the period before the war.<sup>3</sup>

Polarisation in Melbourne occurred over the war itself, over civil liberties, over the economy, and over a multitude of social and moral issues. This article, however, is confined to issues directly bearing on nationalism and class: responses to the outbreak of the war, the divisive impact on Melburnians of the soaring cost of living, the sidelining of the matter of equality of sacrifice, and conflicts over recruitment and conscription.

### The outbreak of war

Most Australian historians of the home front claim that Australians responded with enthusiasm and even elation to the news of Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914. Some criticism of this assumption of unquestioning support occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, but it has rarely entered more mainstream and popular accounts, as is evident in Michael McKernan's recent account of Victorians and the Great War.<sup>4</sup> Joan Beaumont's

excellent overview is a notable exception.<sup>5</sup> A closer examination of some of the Melbourne evidence reveals a mixed and complex response that certainly cannot be characterised as uniform enthusiasm.

Consider crowd behaviour in the city. News of Germany's declaration of war on Russia reached the newspaper offices between 8 and 9 am on Sunday, 2 August; notices were posted on railway hoardings and in the main streets as well as at the offices of the *Age* and the *Argus*. Crowds began to assemble and, as the *Age* reported next day: 'There were few outward signs of excitement ... They did not shout or throw up their hats or cheer, or make any sign of approval or disapproval.'<sup>6</sup> The *Argus* agreed that the mood of the church-going crowds was one of 'noticeable gravity'.<sup>7</sup> 'Melbourne was impressed, staggered, astounded by the news', the *Age* report continued, and the crowds stayed around the newspaper offices till the last trams left the town hall.<sup>8</sup>

The next day crowds waited expectantly outside the *Age* and *Argus* offices and spilled out across Collins Street after work had ceased.<sup>9</sup> Cables conveyed the news of Germany's invasion of France. The biggest response came late in the afternoon after the federal Cabinet and the executive council decided to offer Britain 20,000 troops. The *Age* recorded that the news 'was received with much enthusiasm' and, as the evening wore on, a single voice had only to begin a patriotic song to have thousands of throats take it up. Not until after the cable service had closed down for the night, however, was there any movement away from the newspaper offices to march up and down the street.<sup>10</sup>

Tuesday saw little change in the behaviour of the crowds, and the *Age* noted that there had been 'no "mafficking" and no violent display of racial or national enthusiasm'; 'Melbourne has borne the news with calmness'. But, in the evening, an attempt was made to burn down the German Turn Verein social club in Victoria Parade.<sup>11</sup> During lunchtime on Wednesday it was announced that Britain had declared war on Germany. The crowd response was subdued at first. The *Age* reported: 'The war news struck it with the force of something startling in itself, yet not unexpected. That was the secret, doubtless, of the absence of demonstrations.'

It seemed that 'after the tense excitement of the previous day the public was disposed to take matters quietly' and the coming of rain in the afternoon did not encourage people to wait around. But, in the evening, the behaviour of those remaining in the city changed. Bands up to 300 strong marched up and down Collins and Swanston streets, waving flags, hustling pedestrians and breaking windows in Little Collins Street. In one melee, after the closing down of cables at 10 pm, marchers and mounted police clashed and a youth was arrested for stabbing a police horse in the neck with a pen knife.

Windows in the Chinese quarter were smashed after young men in the crowd declared their intention to 'smash up foreigners'.<sup>12</sup>

On Thursday, the daytime assemblies were once more orderly and those present awaited news with 'grim expectancy'. Again in the evening, however, there was some violence in the 'surging crowds', attributed specifically this time to a group of larrikins – the 'Bourke Street Rats' – one of the many inner-city gangs or 'pushes' that roamed the streets of Melbourne in this period.<sup>13</sup> After this, the papers condemned large street demonstrations and hooliganism and appealed for calm and order: 'Citizens should recognize that there is no need for them to assemble in the streets. By refusing to congregate citizens will render hooliganism impossible.'<sup>14</sup> As the *Truth* astutely commented a week later, the daily newspapers were pleading for coolness while encouraging hysteria by rushing out extraordinary editions 'full of sensational stories, rumours and lies'. 'If the jingoes and hooligans get out of hand and run amok to the danger of peaceful citizens the blame must be laid at the door of the daylies [*sic*].'<sup>15</sup>

As we can see, a complex pattern of crowd behaviour was emerging over the five days from 2 to 6 August. Daytime crowds that assembled in the streets of Melbourne in those early August days were showing interest rather than enthusiasm for the war; initially, at least, they were seeking otherwise unobtainable information. They always gathered outside the newspaper offices and cannot be seen as primarily patriotic, though sometimes those present took up patriotic songs and well-known hymns.<sup>16</sup> Many of those present were undoubtedly moved by patriotic feeling, but the emotion conveyed by these crowds was not a simple phenomenon. It took on its own momentum, concealed complexity and division,<sup>17</sup> and changed according to who was there at different times of the day. One needs, then, to speak about crowds rather than a singular, uniform crowd. The singing occurred mainly in the evenings and was almost certainly fuelled by alcohol. The street marches late on Wednesday and Thursday took place after the trams had stopped for the night. The songs and anthems were familiar – a common denominator for group identity and emotional release – and pubs in Melbourne did not then close until 11.30 pm. Possibly, for some, the marching was a carnivalesque parody of military parades, and the attacks by street gang members on the police indicate a feeling in sections of the crowd that had little to do with patriotism. Even the attacks on things German, when coupled with violence also done to Chinese property in the city, seems better explained as an expression of general ethnocentrism rather than patriotism.

Thus it is by no means clear that the crowds in the streets of Melbourne in that first week of war were expressing support for the war or for politicians' and newspapers' notions of 'liberty', 'freedom' and 'democracy'. Emotions other than patriotism were also at work. Insecurity and anxiety as well as excitement were expressed, at times in a festive spirit and at other times – usually late at night – in the blind opportunistic violence of street gang youths.<sup>18</sup> Doubtless, many of those in attendance felt that they were participating in a moment of profound historical significance with important political and social consequences, though few could have articulated with clarity what these would be. The *Age* report of the crowd atmosphere on the afternoon of Sunday 2 August, conveys this impression of mixed awe and ignorance:

It was something to make the boldest hold his breath. Those who realised most fully what it meant were the quietest ... Young girls, standing beside their friends of the race-course or the football field seemed hardly to know what to make of it all. Their comments were quite inadequate. They said it was 'dreadful', or it was 'terrible' and then if encouragement offered, went on to talk of something else.<sup>19</sup>

A crowd of 40,000 people attended the patriotic carnival held at the Exhibition Buildings a few weeks later on Saturday 12 September. But interpretation of the motives of those present is still not a simple matter. The authorities went out of their way to emphasise entertainment in support of the newly established Lord Mayor's Patriotic Fund; a procession two miles long included ponies, donkeys, clowns and massed bands, finishing at the exhibition grounds with a spectacular mock naval battle.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly the crowds enjoyed the amusements provided and the euphoria fostered. But it is more than likely that these demonstrations and festivities were arranged to encourage a greater patriotic consciousness, rather than serve an existing one.

Public meetings, another commonly used measure of popular response, also require careful analysis. Many were called in support of the war in that first week; all, according to the daily papers, were well attended, and some originally planned for other reasons were rapidly converted into patriotic demonstrations.<sup>21</sup> Packed meetings in the city centre featured leading state and federal politicians of all political persuasions, yet we should not too hastily use this as evidence of unanimous or even overwhelming public support for the war. Who called these meetings? Who attended them? And were such large attendances unusual in Melbourne in this period?

Those who wanted social consensus liked to believe that the war would create unanimity of purpose and the press propagated their hopes: 'War is a

mighty leveller. It knits the rich man to the poor, the weak man to the strong. It brings us all into a plane of common purpose.<sup>22</sup> But the plethora of public meetings and pledges of loyalty do not necessarily show that levelling and drawing together was taking place. The *Age* record of loyal resolutions and donations to the patriotic fund in the first three months of the war shows their source to be almost exclusively middle class or Protestant.<sup>23</sup> Melbourne's Roman Catholic Archbishop, Thomas Joseph Carr, and the Celtic Club made dignified declarations of loyalty, but without the bellicose enthusiasm of leading Protestant clerics.<sup>24</sup> Public meetings show an even clearer pattern. Nearly all were called by local mayors, following the example on 6 August of the lord mayor of Melbourne, David Hennessy. Most aimed to set up patriotic funds in their respective suburbs, and many held concerts, dances and socials.<sup>25</sup> But in at least two Labor councils – Port Melbourne and Richmond – dissent was significant.

Port Melbourne's mayor, Arthur Page, refused local women permission to hold a patriotic meeting in the town hall,<sup>26</sup> explaining that he did not wish to gain popularity by taking advantage of 'the present "hysterical" commotion'. Moreover: 'Only recently a mass meeting was convened in the town hall to discuss the position of the workers. It was unanimously decided to offer the landlords half rent during the war.'<sup>27</sup> Richmond's mayor and Labor MLA for Abbotsford, Cr Gordon Webber, refused to toast the King and stand for the national anthem.<sup>28</sup> He reluctantly agreed to hold a public meeting on 19 August to assist the patriotic fund, but did not chair it, explaining that he was not disloyal but simply a republican.<sup>29</sup> His victory in the council elections later that month was remarkable considering that his opponent made Webber's loyalty the main issue of the election.<sup>30</sup>

Attendances at public meetings were reportedly large – except at Port Melbourne where only 150 showed up<sup>31</sup> – and they seem to have been uniformly supportive of the patriotic and political sentiments expressed by the local councillors, businessmen, church leaders and politicians who addressed them. The advertised purposes of the meetings – patriotic demonstration and fundraising – discouraged people from attending unless they supported these objectives, so opposition is not evident. But, significantly, Labor, trade union and socialist groups seem to have held no demonstrations in support of the war or fundraising. The local councils led by Labor were the only exceptions and they were more often than not succumbing to pressure from local businessmen and the example of other councils.<sup>32</sup>

The grassroots labour movement soon came under criticism from the Australian Women's National League and the Victorian Employers' Federation



for lacking patriotic enthusiasm and persisting with agitation about industrial relations and the cost of living, rather than encouraging unionists to enlist.<sup>33</sup> More moderate nationalists, like RH Lemon of the Chamber of Manufactures, initially believed that 'this crisis would do much to heal the division between employer and employees' and that, if that occurred, 'Australia might yet have cause to bless the crisis'.<sup>34</sup> But the possibility of a *union sacrée* soon vanished before the reserved and conditional response of unionists, the explicitly anti-imperialist rhetoric of socialists<sup>35</sup> and the determination of employers and conservatives to claim that patriotism required cessation of all negotiations on working conditions and wages for the period of the war.

The same lack of a uniformly patriotic response is evident in the organised women's movement during the first six months of the war. The National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV) encompassed 52 affiliated organisations in 1915 and was estimated to represent the views of well over 100,000 women.<sup>36</sup> Though the council did not proclaim its support for war immediately, its actions indicate the direction in which the leadership would take it. At the council's first meeting after the declaration of war, the Governor-General's wife, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, spoke on the work of the Red Cross, and prominent Melbourne doctor and activist JW Barrett on the virtue of supporting what was 'from our point of view' a just war, by going about their daily work and keeping 'a stiff upper lip'.<sup>37</sup> Reports of Red Cross work and pleas for assistance thereafter featured prominently in council activities. Even more telling in these early months was a curt response to the Peace Society's request for cooperation that 'it was not within the province of the Council'.<sup>38</sup> Awareness of dissent within their ranks and a constitutional obligation to take no position on politically controversial matters prevented a more outright and immediate statement of support for the war. Despite the conservative Australian Women's National League's dominance of the executive, peace advocates like Jessie Strong and Vida Goldstein remained influential. Goldstein's Women's Political Association published anti-war views from the outset, then, after a ballot of its members in November, officially opposed Australia's participation in the war and conscription.<sup>39</sup> Early in the following year, Jessie Strong and her husband, the Reverend Charles Strong of the Melbourne Peace society, announced the formation of the Sisterhood of International Peace (SIP) and, just after news of the Gallipoli landing, Mrs Strong suggested that NCWV should revive its Peace and Arbitration Standing Committee.<sup>40</sup> It was a step too far for the majority of the leaders and delegates and, from that point on, the council made no attempt to appear neutral on war-related issues or to tolerate dissenting affiliates and their representatives.

### The cost of living

As Joan Beaumont rightly observes, Australians in 1914 had one of the highest standards of living in the world. But, as Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert note in their edited collection on Paris, Berlin and London, *Capital Cities at War*, absolute standards were less important during the war than people's perceptions that the sacrifices were fairly apportioned.<sup>41</sup> Within the first weeks of the war, labouring people in Melbourne were angered by the decline in real wages as well as the freezing of actual wages. As inhabitants of the national capital, they were in a position to challenge both the federal and state governments on the issue of equality of sacrifice.

Except for what it paid its employees, the federal government had little direct impact on the wages of most of Melbourne's workers. But on prices, Melbourne's workers and unions were optimistic that the federal government would ultimately have more clout. A major electoral promise of the new national Labor government, elected on 5 September 1914, was a constitutional referendum aimed at conferring greater economic powers on the Commonwealth with regard to prices and monopolies. Political conservatives had long opposed this extension of federal powers, successfully defeating it at referendums in 1911 and 1913, but workers' representatives now saw national intervention as more urgent. A widespread drought and the failure of the harvest in 1914 had already caused higher prices for foodstuffs. And a further alarming rise in the cost of essential commodities accompanying the outbreak of the war triggered an emergency meeting in early August of state and federal governments, with the state premiers promising to institute controls.<sup>42</sup> During 1915, Attorney-General William Morris (Billy) Hughes would focus on preparing the referendum proposals to give the national government the authority it lacked. In the meantime, pressure by Melbourne's unions and workers for legislation to control prices was directed to the state authorities.

Along with unemployment, the 'famine prices' for the necessities of life were the main topic of discussion at the Trades Hall.<sup>43</sup> In state parliament, Labor attacked the exploiters, saying that 'the first thing they do when a cataclysm occurs ... is to put up the price of food'.<sup>44</sup> The government of Liberal Premier Alexander Peacock, in accord with the premiers' conference agreement the week before, introduced a Prices of Goods Bill into Victoria's lower house on 12 August. But the legislation was limited to setting maximum prices for those commodities stipulated by the government, specifically flour and meat, and it was scheduled to expire on 31 December, only four months hence.<sup>45</sup> Though it passed through the lower house without significant dissent, the Bill faced conservative opposition in the Legislative Council as not only unworkable but

also as a panic response to ‘exaggerated’ public complaints, an infringement of the natural law of supply and demand, and the herald of ‘socialistic control of the means of production and distribution’.<sup>46</sup>

The measure that finally passed was ineffective and both Labor and conservative members agreed that it had been a ploy to palliate public fears before the November state elections. Any illusions among working-class people that it would ease hardship and achieve some justice for their families disintegrated during September and October when the price of bread did not fall. But only after the elections were over did the government’s failure to act against an admitted cornering of the wheat market become clear. The Labor Party declared that ‘the whole thing from beginning to end has been a sham’.<sup>47</sup> The party and unions mounted a public demonstration in December and a special campaign was organised by women of the labour movement. Now securely re-elected, the premier refused even to see the women’s delegates.<sup>48</sup> Another *Price of Goods Act*, passed in 1915, was even more circumscribed. Again, mercantile interests could claim victory. In the labour press, the *fin de siècle* cartoon caricature of the capitalist, Mr Fat, whose history has been traced by Nick Dyrenfurth,<sup>49</sup> was now recast – as in the English press – as the wartime food exploiter drawing profits while the unemployed starved or marched off to war.

Melbourne’s working-class activists were in the best position to put pressure on the Commonwealth government, local member of the House of Representatives Frank Anstey taking the lead. And it was the Victorian delegation to the interstate conference in May that pressed for immediate action. In June 1915, the federal administration raised the flagging expectations of labour by introducing the long-awaited legislation for referendums to increase the national government’s constitutional powers.<sup>50</sup> *Labor Call* optimistically referred to ‘the people’s war declared’ at last.<sup>51</sup> Billy Hughes, one of the most consistent supporters of this expansion of Commonwealth powers, introduced the first referendum bill on 18 June; the passage of the bills was stormy but rapid and the polling day was set for 11 December. Although the powers had been put to the people in 1911 and 1913, they assumed new significance in the context of war. Liberals and conservatives exploited wartime anxieties fed by the casualty lists from Gallipoli, arguing that to ask people to make decisions on party questions was ‘an intrusion upon the sanctity of grief’.<sup>52</sup> The ‘yes’ case argued that the question was a national one, not merely one of party, and it was only because, ‘Vested Interests are menaced that the ‘Liberal Party cries aloud that “party strife is unpatriotic”’. The capitalists and landlords had not renounced their profits and rents,



Left: From *Labor Call* (Melbourne), 19 August 1915, p. 3

Right: From *Labor Call* (Melbourne), 23 November 1916, p. 1

and the rising cost of living impaired efficiency in the community much more seriously than having to vote.<sup>53</sup>

The cost of living rose in all the Australian capitals in the first year of the war, but the increase was greatest in Melbourne – 172 points compared with Sydney at 117.<sup>54</sup> The value of the pound declined 22.68 per cent; what had cost households 22 shillings (s) and 7 pence (d) soon after the outbreak of war cost, 12 months later, 27s 6d.<sup>55</sup> And this was occurring at the same time as wages were effectively frozen by the Peacock government's suspension of the state wages boards. Billy Hughes's apparent commitment to the referendum cheered Melbourne's labour movement, but his introduction soon after of a war census to discover the number of men potentially available for military service was disquieting. *Labor Call* made an explicit comparison of the two



measures, warning readers that 'The Referendum [was] for the purpose of safeguarding the people, while conscription enslave[d] them'.<sup>56</sup>

Hughes became prime minister at the end of October 1915 and, within a week, had succumbed to the pressure of the premiers to drop the referendum if they introduced legislation to transfer their powers temporarily. The response of the extra-parliamentary party and the union movement was bitter and cynical. A writer in *Labor Call* concluded: 'The profit thugs may exploit now with more safety than ever. The whole range of robbery is open to them.'<sup>57</sup> In Melbourne, the state Labor Party executive summoned federal parliamentarians to a meeting and accused them of betraying democracy.<sup>58</sup> The pessimism of the Victorians was justified. The premiers had only promised to introduce legislation, not pass it. Ultimately, only New South Wales enacted the transfer of powers, though there was enough commitment to the agreement among Victorian Liberals for Premier Peacock to introduce a bill and to try to convince Liberal Party leaders in other states to do the same. In the end, he was howled down by the conservatives, who dumped their previous arguments about the necessity for national consensus during the war and reverted to a defence of states rights and economic freedom. In November, Peacock's leadership was undermined further by a coalition of conservatives and former Liberals that forced a reconstruction of the state ministry and saw the traditional political middle ground disappear.<sup>59</sup>

Symptomatic of this widening political gulf was the failure of an attempt to organise women across the class divide in order to find a way around price rises. The inability of the state government to impose effective price control stimulated the Liberal Party's Ivy Brookes to call for united action among women on the cost of living.<sup>60</sup> Between May and July 1915, with the blessing of the National Council of Women of Victoria, Brookes organised a Housewives' Co-operative Association 'to encourage co-operative buying and marketing of produce direct from the producer to the consumer'.<sup>61</sup> The following months saw the establishment of bureaux in the 'thickly populated', 'democratic' suburbs where there were no local markets – so that basic necessities, mainly foodstuffs, could be delivered directly by producers for sale at reasonable prices to members.<sup>62</sup> Women must 'work together loyally and harmoniously ... like an army', proclaimed the editor of the *Housewife*.<sup>63</sup> But working-class women did not rally to this call for consensus.

This may be attributable to a lack of cash to buy in bulk from the depots, but it also reflects growing class antagonism and suspicion of the leaders' motives. The patriotic and comforts funds that had denied assistance to the unemployed were run by the same women who led the Housewives'

Association.<sup>64</sup> And there was never any serious consideration that those whom cooperation was designed to benefit should take charge of the organisation themselves. In any case, for these women, cooperative schemes seemed a poor substitute for the promised referendums on Commonwealth economic powers, which Liberals like Brookes and conservatives in the Australian Women's National League worked so hard and ultimately successfully to have abandoned in November 1915.

In 1916, a much-diminished Housewives' Association eschewed cooperative trading and continued for the remaining years of the war as a propagandist group preaching the conservative panacea of thrift as patriotic sacrifice.<sup>65</sup> No attempts at similar organisation were made in the other states until the end of the war. In demonstrating the divisive impact of class and wartime economic hardship on hopes for cross-class cooperation, the efforts of Melbourne's women showed the limits of what was possible in the nation at that time.

In the wake of the failure of cooperation, the National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV) took up the less challenging cause of thrift at the beginning of 1917, arguing that 'as economy was essential to winning the war so women must make further sacrifices in pleasure and comforts & in every detail of life'. They agreed to cooperate in a 'women's thrift campaign' to 'eliminate waste and promote efficiency' inaugurated by the League of Honour for Women and Girls.<sup>66</sup> Launched at a public meeting on 19 March, the campaign promoted a triad of conservative economic shibboleths: increased production, reduced expenditure and investment in war loans. At the end of May, a Thrift Campaign Council, comprising representatives of the 52 affiliates of the NCWV, was established to run Thrift Week in June. The program included 'cookery demonstrations, lectures, public meetings and the distribution of "thrift" literature'; lecture topics covered 'food values, economical buying, ethics of thrift and "unconsidered trifles"'.<sup>67</sup>

'Vesta' (Stella Allan, editor of the *Argus* women's pages) was quickly on board, criticising 'the money now spent on luxuries, in both food and clothing'.<sup>68</sup> Mostly this was an adjunct to the federal government's propaganda exercise aimed at encouraging people to put money into war loans, but it coalesced with a punitive campaign of government cutbacks waged by Victoria's Economy Party, which held the balance of power in state parliament from December 1915 and was to lead a new government after the state elections in November 1917. The NCWV women's campaign was mostly directed to ordinary housewives rather than the purchasers of imported cars, furs and silks that the federal authorities were targeting. The League of Honour even

published a recipe book 'for the Empire' to celebrate Thrift Week with the rather inelegant slogan 'A Small Leak will Sink a Great Ship'. Lady Helen Munro Ferguson wrote a foreword endorsing the campaign to avoid waste by voluntary sacrifices. The small amounts saved by strategies such as the substitution of macaroni for meat would all add to the treasury and to 'the staying power of the Empire'.<sup>69</sup>

Victoria's labour movement organisations, including women's groups, were outraged. Since the start of the war, retail prices of food and groceries in Melbourne had risen 28.2 per cent and wages had not kept pace. In the changed political circumstances, the labour movement now launched its own campaign about the cost of living. In defiance of the calls of middle-class women to tighten belts, worker activists urged vigorous protest. 'Thrift' was a ploy of capitalism, claimed one labour paper,<sup>70</sup> and 'Winning the war did not mean starving the people', as Political Labor Council president Chris Bennett put it. But labour leaders soon lost control of the cost of living campaign to more radical elements, and especially the vast numbers of ordinary women who regularly occupied the streets in the following months. From mid-August 1917, Adela Pankhurst, now a Victorian Socialist Party activist, led growing numbers of women in daily demonstrations and marches. They did not now waste time on attacking thrift propaganda and the state government – there were bigger fish to fry.

Being centred in Melbourne, Pankhurst and her followers were able to target federal parliament. They demanded release of food in storage as well as punishment of exploiters, and threatened direct action if necessary to forcibly take the 'people's food'. The Commonwealth government had entered into agreements for the imperial authorities in London to purchase the whole refrigerated beef and mutton supply available for export for the duration of the war. Butter and cheese were also included and, by late 1916, the whole wheat crop as well. But, when shipping shortages and distance prevented the accumulated foodstuffs from being transported and storage facilities became inadequate, the government made no move to negotiate the release of the food locally. Wheat rotted in railway sidings and farmers were forced to limit the number of beasts sent for slaughter to supply the local market – hence the shortages.<sup>71</sup>

The protests targeted parliament house in Spring Street, the seat of the federal government. Restrictions applied under war precautions regulations did not prevent the women from gathering nearby in the Treasury Gardens and marching on the national parliament. The resulting arrests saw an escalation of the protests, including considerable violence and property damage to targeted

businesses in the city and nearby. As Pankhurst had warned: 'the high prices caused the recent demonstrations. Parliament will do nothing and it is left to ourselves. We have only one course left open and that is to demonstrate. I am not afraid to fight even if it does come to the destruction of property.'<sup>72</sup> The demonstrations continued into late September, and were finally put down after the prohibition of meetings, the invocation of the *Riot Act*, the repeated arrest of the ringleaders, and the enrolment of over 400 special constables.<sup>73</sup>

Rumoured attempts to reship some of the wheat and flour from the Port of Melbourne to South-East Asia, the Americas and elsewhere in July saw the Wharf Labourers' Union institute bans on loading 'until the cost of commodities was reduced to pre-war rates'.<sup>74</sup> Eventually the cost of living issue merged with that of the timecard system, which had caused the NSW wharf labourers to go out in sympathy with the railway workers who had struck work on 2 August. The Victorian wharfies went out in support of their Sydney comrades on 13 August,<sup>75</sup> but the cost of living issue remained pre-eminent among the Victorians and they stayed out till November, well after other unionists in both New South Wales and Victoria had resumed work.

While the Women's Political Association (WPA) and the Women's Peace Army, formed by Vida Goldstein in July 1915, did not officially support the street demonstrations and the violent methods used by Pankhurst and her followers, they opposed the harsh treatment of the demonstrators at the hands of the authorities and the refusal of Prime Minister Hughes to hear their case.<sup>76</sup> And they declared solidarity with the wharf labourers in recognition of the sacrifices that they had made in taking industrial action to reduce the cost of food. As their journal the *Woman Voter* put it, the wharfies 'did not strike for themselves, for better wages, better conditions. They struck for their class and for the community, against the increased cost of living, caused by gambling in food supplies. They struck for you and for me'.<sup>77</sup> From the end of August, the WPA made arrangements with the Wharf Labourers' Union 'for getting the names and addresses of members and registering their families' at the Guild Hall so that they could organise provision of food and medical assistance where necessary, especially for 'nursing and expectant mothers'.<sup>78</sup> Thus began the Guild Hall Commune. By early October, nearly 1500 were being fed in the kitchen and restaurant on the premises and 5000 others were supplied with groceries. But it was conceived as self-help and solidarity rather than relief, and its activities were increasingly directed to enabling the men and their families to be as self-sufficient as possible with the active participation of the wharf labourers themselves in setting up services and securing provisions. It continued to operate until February 1918, well after the strike was over.<sup>79</sup>



No solution was found to the high prices of food or the shortages. In August 1917, Hughes had, under pressure from Pankhurst and the demonstrators, referred the question of price rises, the impact of exports on commodities, and market manipulation by combines to the Interstate Commission.<sup>80</sup> But it had little power and its reports, while conceding the impact on commodity shortages of produce locked in storage, denied any profiteering or conspiracy and did not produce any solutions.<sup>81</sup> Prices continued to rise through 1918, popular resentment grew and enthusiasm for the war and recruitment campaigns fell. Though it was not the only factor in accounting for fluctuations in enlistments, this link between concerns about economic justice and the success of recruitment had been evident from the start of the war.

### Enlistment, recruitment and conscription

In anticipation of Britain's declaration of war, a cabinet meeting of the Australian Government, summoned in Melbourne on 3 August 1914, offered 20,000 troops to be raised by voluntary subscription.<sup>82</sup> The Australian Imperial Force (AIF), as it became known, was officially created on 15 August. The widespread early enlistment of men in the AIF has been traditionally used to argue popular support and enthusiasm for the war, alongside street crowds and patriotic meetings. At the end of the first month of the war, 6326 Victorian men had joined up<sup>83</sup> and were in training at the Broadmeadows Camp north-west of Melbourne.

That men from all classes, callings, regions and religious persuasions enlisted has been shown by Lloyd Robson's analysis of attestation papers and more recent release of World War I service records online by the National Archives of Australia.<sup>84</sup> But their motives cannot be so clearly established; the evidence from diaries and letters does not unambiguously support a conclusion that enlistment was in itself proof of popular patriotism.<sup>85</sup> Political and patriotic convictions were not necessarily primary and some enlisted without any such convictions at all or even against their beliefs. It has been suggested that, for Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland, the inducement of unemployment was a consideration in enlistment.<sup>86</sup> This is certainly the case in Melbourne and the state of Victoria as a whole, where the statewide unemployment figure of 14.1 per cent in late 1914 was 8.3 per cent higher than the year before and 3.1 per cent more than the national average.<sup>87</sup> On the fragmentary statistical evidence available, it seems unlikely that this figure had been exceeded since the depression of the 1890s.<sup>88</sup> Soldiering was a viable alternative occupation for many youths who had received basic training

in the compulsory service scheme operating from 1911 and were unable to obtain other work.<sup>89</sup> Other motives include military experience and British birth; in the first week of the war, the press observed that most enlistments were coming from professional soldiers in the reserve and former servicemen, and historians have noted a disproportionate number of early enlistments were prewar British migrants to Australia, men who were now returning to fight for their own country.<sup>90</sup> This is not to deny the imperative of patriotism and imperial fervour among many Australians; it is simply to modify the use of enlistment statistics as proof of overwhelming popular support for the war.

The author of an angry and moving article in *Labor Call* had been down to Victoria Barracks early in the morning to interview men waiting to enlist in the 3rd Military District. He described hungry and tired prospective soldiers who simply looked forward to ‘the hour when they may enrol and obtain a sufficiency to eat’.

None of these men had a job to go to, and many had had no breakfast and had slept in a doss, while others had passed the night in the parks. One man told us he had not had a square feed that week, and all that was left was the army.<sup>91</sup>

All of the men he spoke to were anxious to get work but nothing was available in their trades. The writer glanced through 600 names on the lists of the volunteers and found that only one had private means.

The extent of economic pressure to enlist may never be known precisely,<sup>92</sup> though work by Robert Bollard and John Lack, for example, is producing compelling evidence.<sup>93</sup> Certainly circumstantial evidence is strong enough to give credence to *Labor Call*’s claim that: ‘The man who enlists is no flag-flapper or button-hole freak. He is a case of dire necessity and grim reality. He is a patriot from necessity’. The paper claimed that it was not expressing disloyal sentiments in publishing this information but it was first of all ‘loyal to the workers of the country in which we live’. ‘If you must send men to fight and kill one another, that is no reason provision is not made for those who are compelled to remain behind.’<sup>94</sup>

On the outbreak of war, even the most fervent supporters of the war in the Victorian labour movement had been less enthusiastic than conservatives and Liberals about urging young men to enlist. Most felt some ambivalence about recruitment because it stressed the manpower needs of war rather than the monetary and material requirements. They were unable to put aside their suspicion of patriotic rhetoric that ignored the matter of equal sacrifice. But, even if the wealthy had been prepared to give more, labour men and women believed that to ask men to give their lives was a different order of sacrifice –

one that should be free of all pressure, moral or economic. Certainly neither the Trades Hall Council nor the Political Labor Council urged members to join up and both were concerned about unemployment at least in part because they wished to ensure that those who chose to enlist did so freely and not because economic circumstances had driven them to it.<sup>95</sup> Socialists were reluctant to encourage enlistment at all because of a long-held suspicion of the effects of military training on impressionable young men.<sup>96</sup> Feminists in the Women's Political Association, for their part, argued that to encourage men to go to war was not only to 'give their flesh and blood to make targets for shot and shell' but to expose German mothers to grief and anguish as well.<sup>97</sup>

Melbourne's conservatives and Liberals did not hesitate to encourage men to enlist. Members of the Australian Women's National League (AWNL) believed women should be proud to be the mothers of soldiers: 'What mother is there amongst you who could not rejoice that her son had gone to fight for his country in the cause of honour, of liberty, of justice?'<sup>98</sup> The *Woman* regularly published the names of volunteers whose mothers belonged to the AWNL. Liberals supported active recruitment from the beginning, party strategist and Victorian Chamber of Manufactures president Herbert Brookes even hinting that compulsion might be necessary; it was 'the duty of Liberals to see that there [was] no hesitation or faltering in continuing to send men forward to fight'.<sup>99</sup>

Recruitment did not become an active issue in Melbourne until early 1915, when figures seemed to reveal that Victorian enlistments were lagging behind those of the other states. This was not actually the case except by comparison with New South Wales, but the initial impetus did slow significantly, and the national capital could not be seen to be dilatory. The Victorian Employers' Federation attributed declining numbers to the Trades Hall, claiming 'Australian unionism is disgracing itself by holding back', and attacking the Political Labor Council conference for its failure to pass a resolution calling on men to enlist. The *Argus*, for its part, urged a more systematic recruiting scheme with all-party working committees.<sup>100</sup> Recruitment activists agreed that Australia should aim for a much larger force, perhaps even as great as 200,000 men, and the Australian Women's National League organised one of the first large rallies specifically designed to stimulate enlistment.<sup>101</sup> By early June, two influential Melbourne conservatives, the Reverend TE Ruth and Sir William Irvine, member of the House of Representatives, were arguing for a system of registration of every eligible young man. It 'should not be left entirely to their best and bravest men to come forward', said Irvine.<sup>102</sup> Ruth's argument turned on the modern state's need for compulsion. If the citizen was:

compelled to register for voting purposes, compelled to adopt a system of insurance, compelled to subscribe to State education, compelled to support by taxation all kinds of party measures, why should he not be compelled in the hour of the Empire's dire necessity to defend, if able, the interests of the community?<sup>103</sup>

The Victorian legislature established a joint Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC),<sup>104</sup> which immediately set about organising a recruitment drive to begin on 5 July 1915. Although most Labor men agreed to speak in their electorates when asked, and JW Billson (MLA, Fitzroy) served on the PRC,<sup>105</sup> their enthusiasm was limited. State opposition leader George Elmslie was reported as saying: 'They were asking men with only their lives to give to sacrifice their all.'<sup>106</sup> Labor member for Essendon Maurice Blackburn refused to take part in the campaign at all.<sup>107</sup> Liberals and conservatives seemed to be moving rapidly towards conscription. Sir William Irvine remarked that 'the time may come when we shall have to follow the lead of France and Germany', while Norman Bayles (MLA, Toorak) told a meeting in Fitzroy that, if volunteers were insufficient, 'there was only one course open, and that was conscription'.<sup>108</sup> The *Age* observed approvingly that Britain was turning toward 'the principle of compulsion ... the mainspring alike of industrial and military organisation'.<sup>109</sup>

The PLC and the Trades Hall remained silent on enlistment during May and June. Resentment that had simmered since the outbreak of war boiled over when Melbourne's lord mayor refused to make money from the patriotic fund available to dependants of the unemployed as well as dependants of soldiers. Dependants of the unemployed were just as much casualties of war as dependants of volunteers, claimed the labour press, especially since many of the unemployed might eventually be forced to enlist. Uproar had followed publication of a suggestion to the Chamber of Manufactures that the unemployed be used for military purposes. 'Stay at home and starve or go abroad and be shot is the message which an enlightened and progressive age delivers to its generation', observed a correspondent to *Labor Call*.<sup>110</sup> Although a central relief committee was eventually set up by the state government, it was inadequate and, by May and June 1915, mass meetings and deputations to both state and federal governments were regular events. The unemployed were largely forced onto their own resources and, in addition to soliciting donations, unions held fundraising benefit concerts and carnivals.<sup>111</sup> In this context, the organised labour movement and local Labor politicians were unenthusiastic about urging men to enlist. The calls for compulsory



registration during the July campaign produced discontent in Labor Party branches. Resolutions forwarded to the central executive expressed anger about the inequitable distribution of sacrifice, a theme that Labor speakers reiterated at their recruitment meetings.<sup>112</sup> Divisions between Victorian MPs and federal Labor leaders became increasingly apparent as Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes began to urge the more 'scientific organisation' of manpower and indicated their support for registration.<sup>113</sup> Frank Brennan, MHR for working-class Batman, referred to such measures as 'Tory legislation in disguise'.<sup>114</sup>

Overflow meetings occurred day after day during the recruitment drive, and it certainly flushed out the volunteers – 18,970 had offered up to the end of the campaign, and the July state total was 21,698, by far the highest for the whole war.<sup>115</sup> The appearance of Labor men together with conservatives and Liberals at these meetings gave an illusion of political cooperation that assisted the enterprise.<sup>116</sup> But there were few unionists and Labor women and no Socialist Party or Women's Political Association representatives among the speakers on recruitment platforms.<sup>117</sup> JW Billson justified his willingness to encourage enlistment as the only way to prevent conscription,<sup>118</sup> but most Labor people on the platform avoided the dread word altogether, speaking in general terms of the evils of Kaiserism and the benefits of democracy, and calling on 'Property' to make sacrifices too. They should fight to protect such institutions as wages boards and arbitration courts, argued Martin Hannah (MLA, Collingwood).<sup>119</sup> Even some Liberals, such as JA Membrey (MLA, Jika Jika), began to urge 'men of wealth' 'to recognise their responsibilities more and more'.<sup>120</sup> A soldier-correspondent encamped at Seymour agreed: 'The rich have got everything to lose', he wrote, 'It's them that should be made to enlist'.<sup>121</sup> But the manifesto of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, despite warnings from the Labor Party, made no concessions to the pleas for sacrifice of wealth.<sup>122</sup>

Overt support for voluntary enlistment – however token – was important for leaders of the broad labour movement in their stance against compulsion, and Labor men consented to work on the new State War Council and to cooperate with its recruiting committees. But it mattered less for the ginger groups. A number of new anti-militarist and pacifist alliances held demonstrations in August, including a deputation to the prime minister demanding a declaration of peace terms. The result was further polarisation.

Suspensions in the Victorian labour movement about the underlying motives of the leaders of the recruitment drives were further roused by the federal government's move to put the war effort on an efficient basis by measuring the human and material resources of the Commonwealth.<sup>123</sup> Census legislation

was introduced into federal parliament in July, thus coinciding with the Victorian recruitment campaign. Two cards were issued to every male in the country between the ages of 18 and 60. The personal card asked for current occupation, possible alternative occupation, military training, nationality and country of birth of self and parents. Failure to supply the information could incur a £50 fine or three months imprisonment.<sup>124</sup> The wealth card demanded details of all forms of income and property and was to be filled in by women of independent means as well as men. Failure to do so incurred a fine of £500 or 12 months gaol.<sup>125</sup>

The census alienated left and right. Radicals believed the manpower census presaged both industrial and military conscription and was a direct threat to civil and personal freedom. Employers felt similarly about the wealth census. They were encouraged by the manpower card to hope the government would introduce military conscription, but took umbrage at the wealth census as interference in what should remain private between a man and his banker, and 'sometimes his wife'.<sup>126</sup> Victorian Employers' Federation president Ernest Keep, using words remarkably similar to those of pacifists and members of the labour movement, protested that government action of this nature was where the real threat to civil liberties lay.<sup>127</sup>

The dual war census marked the clearest divergence of opinion yet about the objects and conduct of the war, intensifying ideological differences within the national capital. Anti-war organisations proliferated. The newly formed Women's Peace Army made plans for a Children's Army.<sup>128</sup> The No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), inspired by a similarly named group in Britain, was founded late in August by Victorian Socialist Party members, who dominated the inaugural conference of 200 men. The fellowship worked in close collaboration with the Australian Peace Alliance, formed in Melbourne in September 1914, as well as with other peace groups. It held its first public meeting on 4 October 1915.<sup>129</sup> The immediacy of the threat posed by the war census bills and the need for concerted action encouraged loose federations such as the NCF and the Peace Army. These fostered cooperation without the customary acrimony over minor political and tactical differences.

In the view of Melbourne's conservatives, compulsory military service was not an interference with civil liberty nor, more importantly, a class-based policy. It was, rather, a duty of citizenship, a demonstration of loyalty, and more appropriately called 'national' or 'universal' service. The taking of the manpower census in September encouraged the formation of the Universal Service League, the Melbourne leaders of which were mostly Deakinite nationalists and liberal academics like JG Latham and David Orme Masson.<sup>130</sup>

The league called for the efficient organisation of the population and hoped that the 'War Census Act, recently passed, will furnish the information necessary to enable this to be done'. Even if the voluntary system could produce enough men, 'its incidence is unjust and often harmful'. 'The people of this country through their Parliamentary representatives must voluntarily adopt the principle of compulsory and universal war service for all classes.'<sup>131</sup>

Unlike its counterpart in Sydney, Melbourne's Universal Service League tempted no prominent members of the labour movement into its ranks; when approached, Laurie Cohen, president of the Trades Hall Council (THC), replied that 'militarism is a menace to the liberty of the people'.<sup>132</sup> The THC on 16 September passed a resolution opposing the 'objects set forth in the Manifesto of the Universal Service League' and urging 'the people of Australia to resist to the utmost all attempts to foist compulsory service upon them'; it also called on the imperial government to declare peace terms.<sup>133</sup> From this point, Melbourne led the nation in resistance to the welling momentum for conscription and the battlelines were drawn.

The census was taken in September amid considerable administrative confusion.<sup>134</sup> This was not assisted by the publication of the Universal Service League's manifesto, and the provocative speeches and well-publicised arrests of socialists and pacifists only added to the tension.<sup>135</sup> By December, the censors and police were concentrating almost solely on radical, pacifist and civil liberties organisations, publications and demonstrations.<sup>136</sup> Violence and provocation by pro-war rowdies and returned soldiers were ignored. This more extensive political surveillance of the anti-war activists (antis) corresponded with the now clearly defined class differences on the home front concerning war aims and the way the war was being prosecuted, including intolerance of dissent. In July 1915, the National Council of Women refused to admit Adela Pankhurst as the Women's Political Association delegate because she 'had taken a prominent part in much peace propaganda, had expressed sentiments with which the majority of the Council felt that they could not in any way agree'.<sup>137</sup> Police were called to evict her from the September meeting after a special by-law was passed making all delegates subject to council's approval.<sup>138</sup>

The scapegoating of outspoken radicals and pacifists provided anti-militarist groups with public heroes and a focus on civil liberties, which was now firmly linked with economic injustice in the opposition to pressing workingmen to enlist. Apart from Pankhurst, the main source of trouble with the authorities in Melbourne was the weekly Socialist Party meetings that were held on Tuesday nights at the Bijou Theatre in Bourke Street. The topics of debate during September 1915 differed little from the preceding months –

religion, rationalism, marriage, evolution and socialist theory. In September, however, two of the speakers were summonsed and prosecuted for prejudicing recruiting under the *War Precautions Act*.<sup>139</sup>

Up to this point, the Political Labor Council had been unwilling to do more than castigate the federal government for specific breaches of Labor policy. But, by the time of the state conference the following April, this had changed and the events of November–December 1915 were central to the disillusion.

On 19 December, Adela Pankhurst's speech at the Bijou, 'Shall men enlist?' caused a small riot provoked by returned soldiers who booed, catcalled and sang from the gallery a patriotic refrain aptly entitled 'Boys of the bull dog breed'.<sup>140</sup> Soldiers stormed the stage from the wings and the centre aisle, and a regular cacophony of song arose in the hall as 'Australia will be there' competed with 'The red flag' and 'I didn't raise my son to be a soldier'.<sup>141</sup> The meeting was crowded out two hours before it was due to commence yet, although the military police were present, Major McInerney, the assistant provost-marshal, did not order the men to leave until Pankhurst had given up any hope of resuming her speech.<sup>142</sup> The next day, one of the confessed disruptors, Corporal Hewitt, stood on a soapbox outside the *Age* offices and explained to the gathered crowd that he had forced his way into the meeting because: 'They were talking against enlistment, and anyone who talks like that at a time such as this is talking against the principles which we are fighting to uphold'.<sup>143</sup>

No action was taken against the soldiers involved and the minister for defence, Senator Pearce, refused to see Pankhurst or Vida Goldstein to discuss the issue.<sup>144</sup> The new conservative chief secretary of Victoria, Donald McLeod, declared that meetings of this character should be suppressed and that he would do his best 'to prevent a recurrence in this State not only of undesirable meetings but also of undesirable publications'.<sup>145</sup> His were not the powers of the defence minister, but he did succeed in banning further meetings in support of peace at the Bijou and other licensed theatres, and in making all Sunday evening meetings subject to his personal permission.<sup>146</sup>

The first victims of these attacks and the leaders in the civil liberties agitation were from the Victorian Socialist Party but, in late December, returned soldiers tarred and feathered Fred Katz of the Clerks' Union, before dragging him into Little Collins Street. The situation was not assisted by the failure of the military enquiry to discover the culprits – even Corporal Hewitt was exonerated.<sup>147</sup> The Trades Hall's response indicates its anger and also its claim to a British tradition of freedom:

the outrage is not compatible with the spirit of British fair play, and shows an intoleration, in direct opposition, to the principles and beliefs actuating the heroism of those who have risked their lives in order to retain to civilisation, freedom of thought, speech & action, and the subjugation of 'Prussianism'.<sup>148</sup>

Following the revelation of the manpower census that there were 600,000 'fit' men of military age available for recruitment, the federal government issued a three-part questionnaire to all such men regarding their enlistment intentions.<sup>149</sup> Billy Hughes made his much-quoted 'Call to arms' in mid December, a month before his departure for England early in 1916. Although Victorian enlistments increased substantially in the following three months, the aggressiveness of Hughes's and other campaigners' rhetoric fed into a growing resistance to the anticipated threat of conscription. The Trades Hall at first resolved to urge members to boycott the questionnaire. Though it later rescinded the resolution under advice that it infringed the *War Precautions Act*, most workingmen nevertheless refused to answer.<sup>150</sup>

The industrial movement took the lead in pronouncing against conscription, with the large and usually moderate Australian Workers Union passing an anti-conscription resolution at its federal convention in January. From March to May, the Queensland, Victorian and NSW Labor parties also passed motions of varying strength, the Victorians taking the hardest line against any recalcitrant parliamentarians.<sup>151</sup> It was on the Victorian union movement's initiative, too, that a national trade union conference was called in Melbourne to consider the matter of conscription. Held from 11 to 12 May, it overwhelmingly declared its 'uncompromising hostility to conscription of life and labour', as well as calling on the federal government to act against profit-mongers and to conscript wealth and incomes above £300 per annum.<sup>152</sup> As Nick Dyrenfurth has written, Melbourne was the ideological heart of the 'No' case, and it was Melbourne's John Curtin who was appointed organiser then secretary of the unions' national campaign.

Dyrenfurth's analysis also supports the centrality of economic justice to the case; in 1916, he argues, opposition to conscription was intricately bound up with a failure of Billy Hughes and advocates of 'Yes' to agree to the parallel conscription of wealth, two-thirds of which had been shown in the wealth census of 1915 to be concentrated in the hands of just five per cent of the population.<sup>153</sup> The importance of the cost of living issue in Melbourne accentuated this link and helps explain the uncompromising position taken by the labour movement leading the fight in the national capital. Alongside the restrictions placed on meeting venues for 'No' campaigners, it also



helps explain the behaviour of anti-conscriptionist working-class people, and especially women, in the city's inner suburbs during the campaign that followed the passage of the plebiscite-enabling legislation in late September.

While the arguments about liberty, honour, duty and freedom may have influenced some, they were probably of less import in ordinary people's decisions on how to vote than the loss of family and friends in the conflict, shortage of labour in rural areas, and the key factors identified here in Melbourne's working-class and labour circles: anger about the inequality of sacrifice and resentment about the unjust way the campaign was conducted. Even before the campaign started, the No-Conscription Fellowship, Socialist Hall, the offices of *Labor Call* and the Melbourne Trades Hall Council were all raided by the military. Melbourne's anti-war protesters were not alone. During the campaign in September and October 1917, 12 members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Sydney were arrested and tried on trumped-up charges of conspiracy to burn the city down. The federal government further alienated many all over the country in early October by calling up young unmarried men in anticipation of a 'yes' vote, fingerprinting them, and herding them into training camps. Resulting appeals in the exemption courts from many of these young men did the conscriptionist cause no favours.<sup>154</sup>

While Billy Hughes urged some relaxation in the operation of the *War Precautions Act*, he did nothing to discourage the Victorian Government, local councils and other local authorities from refusing access to meeting places and halls under their control to the antis and having recourse to civil law against demonstrators. By the first week in October, access to public space for the opponents of conscription was becoming extremely limited – the Melbourne City Council and most others refused the use of their halls, and street meetings were broken up. Arrests at such demonstrations – even where they were clearly disrupted by returned soldiers and conscriptionist rowdies – were confined almost entirely to antis. The result was violent retaliation on the part of antis in the last three weeks of the campaign, and its purpose was quite specific – to give the pro-conscriptionists a taste of their own medicine. This appears to have been a spontaneous response from the grassroots and there is little evidence of organisation or even encouragement from labour activists, socialists, Industrial Workers of the World agitators or anyone else.

Working-class people seemed to be saying to the conscriptionists: if you will not allow labour spokesmen and women, representatives of the working class, to speak to us in our own suburbs and streets, we will not allow you to be heard. Men and women throughout the working-class suburbs decided,

then, to enforce their own form of justice and proceeded to disrupt as many meetings as possible. Their means were the count-out, stamping, prolonged jeering, chanting and booing, cock-crowing, interjection, invasion of the platform and loud renditions of popular songs. The tactics were carnivalesque – temporary inversions of the relations of power in society, preventing those with privileged access to public spaces from using these venues without challenge – and were particularly favoured at women-only meetings, though they were not exclusive to them. But evident at many of these meetings, too, was the fact that conscription as an issue was of specific economic relevance to working-class women since it directly affected their welfare and the survival of the family – it threatened to remove husband-breadwinners and sons. It is indicative that, in a Kensington meeting, one woman intoned monotonously throughout the evening, ‘You tell me how a woman can live on 30 bob a week, and we will listen to you’. And, although Victoria was one of the three states that voted ‘Yes’ in 1916, albeit very narrowly, the ‘No’ case achieved a slender majority (50.9 per cent) in the Melbourne metropolitan area as a whole and substantial majorities in working-class electorates.<sup>155</sup>

Hughes’s new National Win-the-War Party, cobbled together from National Labor and the Liberals, won resounding majorities in both houses at the federal election of 5 May 1917, but it should be noted that the Labor vote was still 44 per cent of the national total<sup>156</sup> and, in Victoria, where the party had suffered least structural damage from the conscription split, it gained 46.55 per cent of valid votes, a drop of only 2.59 per cent since the 1914 election.<sup>157</sup> Hughes’s election victory did nothing to invigorate popular support for the war and enlistments plummeted to new depths. In Victoria, they slipped to under 1000 per month from June 1917.<sup>158</sup>

This collapse was the product of war weariness and mounting grief at the extent of the losses suffered in all communities, but it was also the culmination of irreconcilable social and political divisions and the bitterness that they had engendered. During 1917, the city experienced rising sectarianism, headed by the rabid Victorian Protestant Federation and targeting Melbourne’s new Catholic archbishop, Daniel Mannix. Catholics, most of whom were working class, felt under siege. But, underlying the unwillingness in working-class communities to make further sacrifices, was anger about government failure to protect working conditions and standards of living, and increasing resentment of restrictions on free speech, organisation and assembly. In July, the federal government tightened the *Unlawful Associations Act*, making it possible to ban any association by proclamation, seize its property and imprison its members for up to six months.<sup>159</sup> The marked increase in legislative repression also

exercised against strikers during August and September was seen in labour circles as a tactic by conservatives and pro-conscriptionists to obtain by economic pressure what they had not been able to achieve through the political process. Economic conscription had been castigated at the July 1917 Victorian Political Labor Council conference as 'the most cowardly form of recruiting'.<sup>160</sup> Resulting anger and resentment fed into and intensified the widespread strike action and riots in Melbourne before the second conscription plebiscite was announced on 7 November.

The cost of living issue and the associated food riots caused two months of turmoil in Melbourne during September and October 1917. Recent work by John Lack adds to our understanding of the significance of these riots by tracing the reasons particular commercial establishments and places of work were targeted and demonstrating the deep-seated, class-based resentments about economic injustice that preceded the war and were aggravated by it.<sup>161</sup> This embedded anger underpinned the extensive involvement of Melbourne workers in the Great Strike of 1917, which, as a number of historians have argued, was driven by ordinary workers, especially the unskilled at the grass roots of the labour movement, rather than their leaders.<sup>162</sup> While the strike about the introduction of the Taylorist timecard system began and remained centred in New South Wales, by early September more than 20,000 workers in Melbourne were also affected – a third to a half of them actually on strike or locked out and the rest stood down or on short time. The wharf labourers were already out over the cost of bread, but now added a refusal to handle black goods (goods handled by non-union labour) to their cause. As the mainstay of the Victorian strike – first out and last back – they comprised over a quarter of the state's strikers. Until the third week of the general strike, the Trades Hall Council successfully confined industrial action to the Waterside Workers' Federation and the Seamen's Union. The craft union-dominated THC believed that the best support Victorian workers could give was moral and financial, but their attempts to contain the dispute collapsed late in August after the recruitment of an army of scab workers and then the arrest of two NSW union leaders under a new war precautions regulation that made it illegal to invite workers to strike. The THC was thereafter forced to suspend ordinary meetings and establish in their place a Trade Union Defence Committee dominated by representatives of the unskilled unions who now adopted a strict black goods policy.<sup>163</sup>

First the miners of Wonthaggi and Korumburra came out, followed by the ship painters and dockers, the timber workers, carters and drivers, rope and cordage workers, storemen and packers, iron workers, rubber workers,

and coal loaders and baggers. The increasing use of 'free labour' on the wharves and in distribution of goods increased the number of products declared black. Sugar was, for example, declared black and this caused confectionary factories to close down, thus throwing out of work some of the most exploited of all toilers in the labour force, the young female confectionary workers whose sufferings became a cause célèbre during September when publicised by Catholic social worker, Father William Lockington. Class division during the strike was illustrated by the use of public school boys on the wharves; Dame Nellie Melba lent a hand to the strike-breakers, too. Employers' groups, such as the Chamber of Manufactures, were assisted by conservative women's organisations to organise subcommittees to distribute foodstuffs and essentials round the city, and the federal government established a National Service Bureau to recruit 'volunteer' labour. Labour women supported their own, and the Women's Political Association commune focused on the wharfies and their families. But the strikers were defeated, union leaders were arrested on charges of conspiracy and the settlement was extremely harsh with no concessions. Preference for jobs that had been vacated by strikers was given to scab workers and their unions.<sup>164</sup>

When the second conscription referendum campaign got under way in Melbourne in the second week of November, employer organisations and the various governing authorities were in no mood for negotiation or concession, and were unwilling to brook *any* dissent. The chambers of commerce, manufactures and agriculture all gave their assistance to the 'Yes' campaign, monetary as well as moral, as did the Victorian Employers' Federation.<sup>165</sup> For their part, labour people, after the relentless and concentrated siege on their standard of living and civil liberties during the last few months, dug in and responded not with reason but with defiance.

Given the struggles and defeats of the preceding months, it is not surprising that the mood of Melbourne's labour movement in mobilising for a new struggle against conscription was generally tired and pessimistic. An article in *Labor Call* expressed bitterness that they again had to face the question of compulsion when the real issues were the control of food supplies and prices.<sup>166</sup> With the departure of John Curtin to Western Australia earlier in the year, the charismatic Archbishop Mannix filled a leadership vacuum, though his outspokenness also increased sectarian hostilities. And anger about constraints on freedom of expression was increased by yet another war precautions regulation to disallow public expression of 'any false statements likely to affect people's voting intentions'.<sup>167</sup> That, of course, was almost entirely a matter of interpretation. In Melbourne, a number of anti-

conscription speakers as well as the editors of the *Catholic Advocate* and *Truth* were hauled before the courts.<sup>168</sup>

Most municipal councils and the Melbourne City Council – as in 1916 – refused the use of their town halls and streets to the antis.<sup>169</sup> Kew City Council attempted to get cooperation among all the local councils with a circular letter, encouraging them to decorate their halls with bunting and ‘Yes’ banners, even though most such venues were to be used as polling stations. Working-class Richmond possessed one of the few councils that refused to cooperate.<sup>170</sup> Soldiers again disrupted meetings and were treated with tolerance and sympathy by the press.<sup>171</sup> With most access to avenues of influence once more closed to them, the antis resorted to the same tactics they had used in 1916, but now they turned violent.<sup>172</sup> The pinnacle of the campaign in Victoria was reached on 10 December when the conscriptionists organised a ‘Great “Yes” demonstration’ at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Of 100,000 present, at least 20,000 were anti-conscriptionists, although tickets had been restricted. The papers tried to put a good gloss on it but many of the speakers, including the prime minister, had not only eggs but large lumps of road metal hurled at them, and a good number of them were forced to give up their speeches by the yelling of the crowd.<sup>173</sup> The national majority for ‘No’ doubled with 1,181,747 ‘No’, votes cast compared with 1,015,159 ‘Yes’ ones. Victoria changed sides from 48.12 per cent for ‘No’ in 1916 to 50.21 per cent in 1917<sup>174</sup> – an increase that is at least partly attributable in working-class circles to the events of the preceding months.

The continuing conviction that equality of sacrifice was being ignored and that the subtext of inaction on the cost of living was support for economic conscription is evident in the further decline in enlistments in 1918 and the ultimate failure of the Governor-General’s week-long recruiting conference held in Melbourne in April. The class division and mistrust heightened by the war could not be overcome. The national director-general of recruiting, Victoria’s Donald Mackinnon, understood the ‘poisonous legacy’ the conscription plebiscites had left in their wake, as did Governor-General Munro Ferguson, who took the initiative of calling together representatives of all political and industrial interests in an attempt to form a bipartisan consensus.<sup>175</sup> But both underestimated the even deeper issues of economic hardship and failure to ensure equality of sacrifice that had irreparably alienated the labour movement. Though nearly all the state Labor Party and trade union leaders attended, they were not prepared to commit themselves to any scheme unless all the grievances listed by federal Labor leader, Victoria’s Frank Tudor, could be resolved. Of the five, three dealt with conscription,



victimisation of unionists and war precautions restrictions on liberty and free speech, but two were explicitly about the broader issues of economic justice and, specifically, 'economic conscription' and 'profiteering'. None of the labour movement's representatives was prepared to talk about the specifics of recruitment until the reasons for the decline in enlistments were agreed on and strategies for dealing with them formulated.<sup>176</sup>

After he made an appearance on the third day, Prime Minister Hughes, under pressure from Munro Ferguson, made grudging concessions to Tudor's concerns but they were phrased with varying levels of precision. Unanimity on a scheme for voluntary recruitment was never going to be an achievable outcome of the conference. The most that was possible was a motherhood statement 'to make all possible efforts to avert defeat at the hands of German militarism, and [to urge] the people of Australia to unite in a wholehearted effort to secure the necessary reinforcements under the voluntary system'.<sup>177</sup> And, although Tudor and some of the other labour movement representatives, notably Queensland's premier TJ Ryan, did participate in recruitment campaigns in the following months, they did not bring many of their followers with them. Furthermore, the Labor Party federal conference in Perth in June passed a resolution of support for recruitment that was hedged with impossible conditions and dependent for its implementation on 'a referendum of members of all branches and affiliated organizations' with a completion date of 1 November.<sup>178</sup> The class divide over active support for the war had proved unbridgeable and enlistment numbers continued to decline dramatically until the Armistice brought war to an end on 11 November.

## Conclusion

As the interests of dominion, national and state governments in Melbourne came into alignment on prioritising the demands of war, the population of the nation's capital divided and entered into a period of violence and bitter recrimination that lasted from 1915 through the rest of the war years and beyond. Class lines hardened and were increasingly inflected by gender as well as by sectarian divisions. Crucial to this process were the perception and reality of unequal sacrifices demanded of working-class families and communities, and the restrictions placed on their ability to speak out in protest against them.