

HON BILL SHORTEN MP

BOOK LAUNCH: THE CONSCRIPTION CONFLICT

Good evening everyone

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, I pay my respects to elders past and present.

And it's an honour to be asked to say a few words about a very fine collection of pieces, written by a very fine collection of scholars.

A lot of books have been written about the Labor Party and the labour movement in the past three years – and I have to say, it's a special pleasure to launch one when you don't have to worry about checking the index for your name.

The Conscription Conflict tells a forgotten story, it fills a void in Australian history.

And – as the best writers of history do – the authors of this collection allow the protagonists to speak for themselves.

The sound and fury of those times, the words that bounced off these very walls, still ring loudly in this book.

The moral judgments, the character attacks, the righteous indignation, the bitter condemnations and the thundering denunciations leap out from these pages.

Transporting the reader back to a set of circumstances almost impossible to imagine:

A newly-installed Prime Minister:

- lacking the support of his divided party
- abandoning a position he'd defended forcefully only a year before
- and forcing Australia to a national opinion poll
- which would unleash a hurtful, divisive debate

...I guess a hundred years isn't such a long time in politics.

Now friends

As we gather here this evening, I'm sure there is already a blogger somewhere frantically mashing their keyboard to attack this book as an attempt to dishonour the diggers or rewrite the history of the First World War.

Taking the time to actually read the book would only slow them down.

But this important piece of research and writing isn't an attempt to subvert the Anzac legend, or substitute for it.

Instead, as all good history does, it shows us another side, a new perspective.

So much of what we know and remember about this period traces back to the 300,000 Australians who served on the Western Front.

The 61,000 who died.

The 8,000 taken prisoner.

The 16,000 gassed.

The 4,000 who lost more than one limb.

The 37,000 so horribly disfigured, that they referred to themselves ever after as the 'broken gargoyles'.

Those who came home, changed forever by what they had endured.

Young Australians old before their time.

And those who still lie in the far corners of those foreign fields

The history of those times was written by the deeds of those who served.

Authored by a generation for whom the names of villages on the other side of the world Fromelles, Pozieres, Villers-Bretonneux...

...spoke for a knock at the door, a war office telegram, tears in the night and an empty chair at every Christmas that followed.

We live in an Australia united in its respect for the memory of those who served.

But a century ago, this was the command post of a divided home front.

A key battleground in a complex, white-hot national debate.

Arguments as high-level and intellectual as the balance between liberty and loyalty...

...the limits of compulsion in a democracy, the moral purpose of solidarity.

This was a debate where every position could be made to look like a contradiction.

How could a union movement that bound its members in pursuit of rights for the worker, object to the same rule when it came defending the liberty of a nation?

How could the well-heeled supporters of conscription believe it was acceptable to send labourers and factory hands with nothing in their pockets to war against their will...

...yet reject outright the idea of their wealth being enlisted to support the same cause.

But for all the intellectual complexity and ethical theorising, this debate was also capable of being boiled down to questions as fundamental and personal as the one made famous in an open letter from medical officers at the Western front:

'Can a woman send another woman's son to his death?'

In such a climate, both sides raged at the immoral disloyalty of their opponents.

One camp said a vote against conscription was a vote for a German occupation.

But, the other said, a vote for conscription was also a vote for the very type of German despotism that forced a man to fight against his judgment.

And- of course - both sides sought to enlist the memory of the dead against the consciences of living.

Voting 'No' dishonoured those who had made the supreme sacrifice.

Voting 'Yes' betrayed the freedom the Anzacs had fought for.

The symmetry of arguments, of language – and of passion – was remarkable.

As this book puts it:

“Each thought the other threatened their fellow countrymen with death.

And in their heated propaganda, each portrayed the other as a murderous traitor.”

In both Conscription debates wives, widows and daughters were deliberately courted, repeatedly lectured and shamelessly verbalised – but all-too rarely heard.

And amidst the patriotic bluster, few missed the chance to call on the name of God.

The Conscription question became a platform and a proxy for sectarianism.

Indeed, so often in these pages, I was reminded of Abraham Lincoln's famous description of the Union and Confederate forces:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.

Never – before or since – have so many Australians had their patriotism, their love of country, their loyalty to their family, their place in this nation questioned.

In the posters and pamphlets:

'If you would not be a murderer – vote Yes'

Or the 'No' campaign decrying the 'Blood Vote' – the '*grim death warrant of doom*'.

But also in the language of leaders – particularly the Prime Minister.

Next time you overhear someone bemoaning the 'lost golden age of civility' in the public discourse - get them a copy of this book.

Show them Billy Hughes saying that opponents of conscription are happy to be:

'safe behind the barricades of dead and dying men'

Attacking those who disagreed with him as the '*shirkers*' and the '*selfish*'.

'A swarm of monstrous insects buzzing throughout the land...whispering into confiding ears some new and insidious statement'.

Try and imagine any Prime Minister speaking that way about more than half his fellow Australians – in a time of war no less.

The true beauty of this book is that every reader can draw something different from it.

Each section offers different angles and different views, each stands complete on its own, yet also works as part of an interlocking set of ideas - a kind of scale model of the complexities and competing interests at work.

In a war where the majority of combatants were conscripts, this book offers important international comparisons and context.

At a time when women's suffrage was in its infancy, the examination of women's leadership, advocacy and organising

power – often patronised and dismissed at the time – is instructive.

But there were two things in particular that struck me.

The first was the result of the votes cast by service personnel.

Both sides used the image of the ‘brave boys at the front’ for their own purposes.

But – if you came to this question with no prior knowledge – you would be forgiven for assuming that men serving companies decimated by shells, mustard gas, machine guns and disease.

Surely these men would vote overwhelmingly for reinforcements – 70:30 or more.

Yet the margin was only 55-45.

And – according to contemporary analysis – the ‘yes’ vote flowed mainly from those yet to serve and still in training.

Perhaps the people who truly knew the reality of war, who had seen and endured its horrors, had no interest in inflicting it on their fellow citizens against their will.

Or perhaps those who had freely answered their country's call did not want to serve alongside those put in service by chance.

The second significant lesson I hope any Labor person would take from this book is not a new revelation as such but a powerful reminder of an old truth.

In this mighty building the defeat of conscription was celebrated as a great triumph – and commemorated for years after as one.

But for Federal Labor, the victory was more pyrrhic than historic.

Between Federation and the first Conscription referendum, Labor had been Australia's dominant political party.

Not just a movement for change but governments that had proven capable of delivering it.

But in the subsequent 24 years, Labor would hold power for just three.

In one of those ironies fiction would not allow but history rejoices in, it was John Curtin who brought Labor out of the wilderness.

As a young firebrand he had made his name as a leading voice in the Anti-Conscription cause – and then as a wartime Prime Minister, he introduced it – without a national vote.

In the party, in the parliament – and around the nation – Curtin showed the leadership, the temperament Billy Hughes had not.

And if this book teaches us about the many flaws and scars borne from the Conscription conflict, it also speaks for the greatness of a man who, in Australia's darkest hour showed the ability to bind up these wounds and keep his country together.

Friends

The work you have done shines a light on a forgotten corner of our national story.

It should challenge those who are inclined to dismiss our political history as tepid or dull, inconsequential or dry.

In *The Conscription Conflict* you have given us big characters, important questions, a vast canvas of arguments and ideas, enterprises of pith and moment.

And – in honour of our hosts – I would say that this book also shows that while some institutions fade and fracture, some groups flare and then fizzle, solidarity truly is forever.

It's a privilege to launch this new contribution to Australian history and to congratulate all of you who have brought it into being.

Well done.