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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Archer, Robin (2017) Liberty and loyalty: the Great War and Labour's conscription dilemma. Australian Journal of Politics & History, 64 (1). ISSN 1467-8497

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Available in LSE Research Online: March 2018

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Accepted for AJPH (2018)

LIBERTY AND LOYALTY:
THE GREAT WAR AND LABOUR'S CONSCRIPTION DILEMMA

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Précis: A unique struggle over conscription was a defining characteristic of the Australian experience of the Great War. The labour movement was at the center of opposition to conscription, and arguments from liberty were central to its stance. But anti-conscriptionists had to make their arguments in an environment shaped by powerful competing appeals to loyalty. This article examines the ways in which labour anti-conscriptionists sought to minimise the impact of these loyalist appeals, while pressing ahead with their central liberal arguments. Two ways of interpreting these arguments enabled them to do this. The first emphasised the Britishness of the liberal tradition and the close relationship between conscription and 'continental despotism'. The second emphasised the affinity between the liberal tradition and the New World and drew on other comparisons, especially with North America.

LIBERTY AND LOYALTY: THE GREAT WAR AND LABOUR'S CONSCRIPTION DILEMMA

The Australian conflict over conscription during the First World War was extraordinary by any standard. It gave rise to what was arguably the most intense and bitter political schism the country ever experienced.¹ And both the outcome of the conflict and the process that led to it were quite without precedent, not just in Australia but anywhere in the world.

In the historically liberal English-speaking countries, conscription had long been anathema. Unlike in all the other belligerents, none of these countries had conscript armies in place when the war broke out. Yet in the course of the war, most of their governments eventually sought to introduce conscription. And wherever governments made this effort, they eventually succeeded, although usually only well into the war and after a long period of anguished debate. Australia was the sole exception. Only there was opposition strong enough to stop conscription from being introduced.²

The process that led to this outcome was also wholly unique. On two occasions, on 28 October 1916 and on 20 December 1917, the Commonwealth government tried to introduce conscription by seeking the consent of citizens in a referendum. On the first occasion, the referendum was held in an effort to bypass parliamentary opposition. On the second occasion, it was held in order to over turn the outcome of the first. Each time the proposal was narrowly rejected.

At the heart of the opposition to conscription was Australia's precociously powerful labour movement. It was the opposition of Labor MPs that led Prime Minister Hughes to opt for a referendum in the first place, and it was Labor Party and trade union

¹ Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013), 223; Stephen Garton and Peter Stanley, "The Great War and its Aftermath, 1914-22," in *The Cambridge History of Australia, Volume 2*, eds Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 52-53.

² Robin Archer and Sean Scalmer, "'The most interesting experiment that has ever been made in a political democracy': Conscription and the Great War," in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, eds Robin Archer *et al* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2016).

organizations that were far and away the most important constituent groups within the anti-conscription campaign.³

Elsewhere I have examined the arguments within the labour movement that led so many Labor MPs and activists to oppose conscription, and I will briefly summarise those findings below. However, anti-conscriptionists had to make their arguments in an environment marked by powerful counter-arguments from the proponents of conscription – arguments that also had resonance within the labour movement. Here I want to examine how labour anti-conscriptionists framed their arguments in order to navigate their way through this environment and minimize the impact of the charges levelled against them.

I have examined their arguments both before and after the outbreak of war. But I have paid special attention to the year or so prior to the first referendum, since that was when the basic lineaments of their stance congealed.⁴

From late 1915 onwards, a series of developments took place that eventually made conscription the all-consuming focus of public life. Labor had won the federal election in September 1914 under the leadership of Andrew Fisher. As Prime Minister, despite some initiatives that could be seen as foreshadowing conscription, Fisher had sought to reassure opponents that it was not on the agenda. But by the end of October 1915 he had resigned and been replaced by William Morris Hughes – long one of the principal advocates of compulsory military training. In mid January 1916, Hughes left for London via New Zealand and North America to consult other leaders. Meanwhile, various

³ Robin Archer, 'Stopping War and Stopping Conscription: Australian Labour's Response to World War I in Comparative Perspective', *Labour History*, 106 (2014): 57-9 and 64-6; Frank Bongiorno, "Anti-Conscriptionism in Australia: Individuals, Organisations and Arguments," in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, eds Robin Archer *et al* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2016).

⁴ My sources include the labour press; the minutes of key state and federal party and union meetings; the speeches of important opinion formers; the private papers and correspondence of politicians, trade unions leaders and other activists; contemporary publications, pamphlets and campaign literature; the memoirs of major protagonists; and earlier scholarly research. Among the labour papers I have read particularly closely are: the Sydney-based *Australian Worker (AW)*, which was the official organ of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the best edited and most influential labour paper; the Melbourne-based *Labor Call (LC)*, which both reflected and influenced the thinking of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council (THC), which was itself central to the conscription conflict both ideologically and organizationally, in part because of its proximity to the federal parliament; and the *Socialist*, which was the paper of the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) whose activists and sympathisers were important early opponents of conscription.

developments – growing pressure from pro-conscription groups and the opposition Liberal Party; the introduction and extension of conscription in Britain; Hughes increasingly strident rhetoric; and a series of conferences from January to May in which key Labor Party and trade union organizations committed themselves to strenuous opposition – combined to bring the conflict over conscription to fever pitch. Hughes returned to Australia on 31 July 1916, announced the decision to hold a referendum on 30 August, and succeeded in passing enabling legislation in late September. The referendum was set for 28 October.

The Argument from Liberty

Labour anti-conscriptionists invoked multiple arguments. But liberal arguments were central to how they understood their opposition.⁵ These arguments were the centerpiece of labour’s objection to conscription from the outset. “An outrage on liberty” was how labour’s most influential paper summarized its response to the introduction of conscription in Britain.⁶ And as pressure for conscription began to mount in Australia, it warned that “there is no question of greater importance than this. It goes to the very sources of our being. Are we free men? Or are we slaves?”⁷

Liberal concerns were also at the heart of the arguments put forward by the movers of the critical anti-conscription resolutions adopted in April and May 1916 by the Victorian Political Labor Council (PLC), the NSW Political Labor League (PLL), and the special

⁵ For a fuller statement of the argument in this section and the evidence to support it see Robin Archer, “Labour and Liberty: The Origins of the Conscription Referendum,” in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, eds Robin Archer *et al* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2016), 40-52. The interpretation here stands in contrast to the interpretations offered in much of the existing literature. According to a standard interpretation, the conflict was not really about conscription, but was rather about a factional conflict between politicians and ‘industrialists’. See Ian Turner, *Industrial and Labour Politics* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1965), 113 & 178. According to an influential revisionist interpretation, the appeal to liberal values by anti-conscriptionists was largely inauthentic. See John Hirst, “Australian Defence and Conscription: A Re-assessment, Part I,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 2, no 101 (1993), 608-27. And according to the an important recent interpretation, labour was not in principle opposed to conscription at all, so long as it was accompanied by conscription of wealth. See Nick Dyrenfurth, *Heroes and Villains*, 200-7. For fuller assessment of each of these interpretations see Archer, “Labour and Liberty”, 54-65.

⁶ *Australian Worker (AW)*, 13 January 1916, 1.

⁷ *AW*, 27 April 1916, 1. There were similar sentiments in the Melbourne-based *Labor Call (LC)*. See, for example, *LC*, 27 April 1916, 6 and 7.

All Australia Trade Union Congress on Conscription, which together sealed in place labour's opposition in the key eastern states.⁸

These concerns were compounded by fears that the case for military conscription could easily be extended to justify industrial conscription in the workplace. They were reinforced by the increasingly authoritarian political environment in which labour found itself and the increasingly strident rhetoric of the Prime Minister. And they can be found in private correspondence as well as in public debate.⁹

Liberty-based arguments continued to be prominent after Hughes announced his intention of holding a referendum. According to the Secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council, E.J. Holloway, who was arguably the most significant Labor Party and union official in the country: "The great test has come. ... We must choose between Freedom and Slavery. If we would be Free, then we must fight to the last gasp against the introduction of conscription in Australia."¹⁰ Similar arguments remained prominent in the final manifestos issued on the eve of the referendum.¹¹

The Loyalism Dilemma

However, in making these arguments, Labour anti-conscriptionists faced a dilemma. At its heart was their claim to be both Australian nationalists and British Empire loyalists. The dilemma had two sources. Facing outwards, it stemmed from their need to frame

⁸ *LC*, 4 May 1916, 9-10; *AW*, 11 May 1916, 19; Australian Trade Union Congress (AATUCC), *Australian Trade Unionism and Conscription being Report of Proceedings* (Melbourne: Labor Call Print, 1916), 11-13.

⁹ See, for example, the private correspondence with Andrew Fisher, now in London, in the Andrew Fisher papers, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS 2919/1/195, 14 February 1916, MS 2919/1/233, 23 August 1916.

¹⁰ *LC*, 14 Sept 1916, 9. In 1916, Holloway was Secretary of the THC, President of the Victorian PLC, President of the ALP federal executive, and Secretary of the national trade union anti-conscription executive. See Nick Dyrenfurth, *Heroes and Villains* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), 204.

¹¹ E.J. Holloway, *The Australian Victory over Conscription in 1916-1918* (Melbourne: Anti-Conscription Jubilee Committee, 1966), 8-10; *AW*, 26 Oct 1916, 5, 9, and 11. Although note that in the month of the referendum campaign itself, labour's arguments proliferated in all directions, as activists reached for any claim they thought might help their cause.

their arguments in an ideological space partly defined by their opponents' emphasis on loyalty. But it also stemmed from the dual commitments present within labour's ranks.

The dilemma can already be seen in Andrew Fisher's initial responses to the prospect of war during the 1914 federal election campaign. On 31 July 1914 he made his famous speech that should the worst happen and Britain go to war, "Australians will stand beside our own to help defend her to our last man and our last shilling." Yet on 4 August he gave another speech in which he said that his policy was to put "Australia first, the Empire second".¹²

Labor was acutely aware of the dangers of being painted as disloyal to Britain, as Fisher's letters to his wife, his early experience of the 'Union Jackals' in the wake of the Dreadnaught crisis in 1909 and 1911, and the charges of 'disloyalty' levelled at Labor in their opponents' election propaganda all make clear.¹³ To counter them, the Party made repeated use of the 'last man and last shilling' slogan. However Fisher's comments about putting Australia first accorded more closely with Labor's previous thinking.

The instinct of much of the labour movement was to assert the importance of Australianness, while taking for granted the continuing importance of imperial ties to Britain. In its last issue before the prospect of war redirected the election campaign, the *Worker* complained about a new stamp that "hasn't even a sprig of wattle to proclaim its nationality. The King's head is its main feature and the roo and emu are conspicuous by their absence". And on the eve of the election, it accused Labor's opponents of being the "Hate-Australian party" for having opposed, *inter alia*, the establishment of an Australian navy. Likewise, the *Labor Call* insisted that, while "we will assist England" and are not disloyal to the Empire, "we say Australia first".¹⁴

¹² J.B. Hirst, 'Australian Defence and Conscription: A Re-assessment, Part I', *Australian Historical Studies*, 25, no 101 (1993): 616; Nick Dyrenfurth, *Heroes and Villains: The Rise and Fall of the Early Labor Party* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011): 159.

¹³ See Fisher papers, letter to Maggie, 28 August 1914, NLA MS 2919/1/103, Day (2008, 289-90), and Federal Election Ephemera 1914, 'Disloyalty' leaflets, NLA. See also LC, 13 Aug 1914, 2; AW, 20 Aug 1914, 1; Catts papers NLA MS 658/1/18-20.

¹⁴ AW, 30 July 1914, 13; AW, 3 Sept 1914, 1; LC, 'The "Patriotism" of Joseph Cook and the Patriotism of Labor', 13 Aug 1914, 4; and LC, 'Patriotism of the "Labor Call"', 10 Sept 1914, 5.

But loyalist pressure abated only briefly after the election. Stoked by the war, as well as party interests, it again began to mount, with the conscription agitation as its principal focus. Constant trumpeting of the thousands of unionists who had volunteered to serve and the “magnificent contribution” of the labour movement betrayed a certain defensiveness. An article about an Australian-born Labor MP and his multiple sons, grandsons, nephews and nieces on active service, concluded that this was “another strong proof, if any were needed, as to the loyalty of the Australian-born”. Clearly the journal thought it *was* needed.¹⁵

There was a small number of activists and writers for whom this was purely a question of tactical necessity. For Australian nationalism and Empire loyalism were not the only options. There was another option – genuine internationalism – that exercised an influence on a number of strategically located individuals and led to the occasional direct challenge to patriotic loyalties of either sort. Typical were those, like the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) leader Robert Ross, who were influenced by socialist internationalism. The VSP had successfully sponsored the Hardie-Vaillant resolution at the Melbourne THC in June 1914, and the symbolic affirmation of internationalism remained important to it, even within the limits set by the War Precautions Act.¹⁶ The Australian Peace Alliance’s Frederick Riley was also sometimes prepared to draw attention to the equivalence of all sides in the conflict.¹⁷ And Henry Boote, the editor of the *Australian Worker* and arguably labour’s most influential ideas-merchant, had been influenced by this tradition as well. Both in public and in private he sometimes expressed hostility to patriotism of all sorts. In private in August 1914 he told Mary Gilmore – the poet and editor of the women’s page in the *Worker* – that he supported “neither the

¹⁵ AW, ‘All Australian’, 6 Jan 1916, 16.

¹⁶ For example, the program of the picnic organised in Studley Park, Melbourne for 9 Dec 1916 to celebrate the referendum outcome featured a poem by Lowell calling for “a world wide fatherland” See Riley papers, NLA MS 759 Box 51, Folder 6/7. On Hardie-Vaillant see Ross papers, NLA MS 3222, Folder 1/14-16.

¹⁷ See Riley papers ‘An Appeal to Unionists’ 9 March 1916, NLA MS 759 Box 51, Folder 6/1.

Germans nor the English”, and in public he argued that the evolution of that “queer thing” patriotism would be incomplete “till it stretches over the whole human race”.¹⁸

But as with wholehearted hostility to the war, the wholehearted embrace of internationalism carried the danger of leaving its advocates marginalised or silenced or both.¹⁹ The appeal of Australian nationalism, like the related appeal of the White Australia policy, was far wider, and the appeal to it, far safer.

However, the appeal of loyalty to Britain and the Empire was also very widespread. And it had a strong purchase in the ranks and among the leaders of the labour movement. At the close of an election rally in NSW, Fisher asked for “three cheers for the British Empire”. His audience responded with hearty cheers followed by a rousing rendition of ‘Rule Britannia’.²⁰ This was not unusual. Declarations of loyalty to the British Empire at labour rallies were regularly greeted by loud cheering and an outburst of singing.²¹ The 1915 Commonwealth conference of the Labor Party also passed a loyal resolution on the occasion of the King’s Birthday – not something it had ever previously done – praying that his reign be crowned by British victory. Its passage was met with “resounding cheers and the singing of ‘God Save the King’”.²²

Just as ‘liberty’ was the great rallying cry of the anti-conscriptionists, ‘loyalty’ was the great cry of their opponents. What gave the loyalism dilemma its central importance was the public rhetoric of these opponents, which was constantly challenging the loyalist credentials of labour anti-conscriptionists. Anti-conscriptionists were thus faced with the danger of dissonance between their arguments and an influential current of public opinion

¹⁸ M.E. Lloyd, *Sidelights on Two Referendums 1916-1917* (Sydney: William Brooks and Co, n.d.), 27; and *AW*, ‘Patriotism’, 12 Nov 1914, 1.

¹⁹ Note, for example, the fate of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – a small organization whose alleged activities were constantly placed in the public eye by Hughes and his allies in an attempt to delegitimise labour anti-conscriptionists. For more on the IWW see Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰ *AW*, 13 Aug 1914, 17.

²¹ Neville Meaney, *Australia and the World Crisis 1914-1923* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), 23 & 25; Dyrenfurth, *Heroes and Villains*, 159.

²² Meaney, *World Crisis*, 46.

championed by their opponents. To minimise this danger, they had to think carefully about the way they framed their arguments.

There were two interpretations of their central liberal argument to which anti-conscriptionists could appeal. Each served, in effect, to give the argument a geography. One interpretation emphasised the Britishness of the liberal tradition. The other emphasised the special affinity between the liberal tradition and the New World. Two different ways of seeing Australia followed from this. Should Australia see itself as a new (and true) British community or as a part of the New World? These points of view were not mutually exclusive. But they were sometimes in tension. Should Britain be seen as the home of liberty or as part of the hide-bound liberty-constraining Old World?

The British Tradition

According to the first interpretation, Britain was the home of liberal values and institutions and being a free people was a special characteristic of the British. As a British community, Australia had an obligation to uphold this heritage and deliver on its promise. Thus the defence of Australia's freedoms was mandated not just by moral right but also by British tradition. If Australia was fighting to defend Britain, this was a significant part of what it was fighting for. The labour press often invoked this special relationship between Britain and freedom. "Freedom of expression," for example, was "the glory of the British race", and the absence of conscription, in particular, was one of the "chief marks of her freedom".²³ This position was, of course, shared with British anti-conscriptionists. "Freedom from conscription is one of the few great heritages of freedom that belong to the British nation," declared the National Council of the (British) Independent Labour Party (ILP) in a statement prominently reproduced in the *Labor Call*.²⁴ Likewise, the *Worker* argued that "the British for long centuries have stood out in the splendid virility of their opposition to compulsory military service. They have fought many wars. Victory after victory is inscribed on their banners. ... And always it has been

²³ *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 1 and Blackburn letter in *AW*, 1 Jun 1916, 19.

²⁴ *LC*, 29 July 1915, inside back cover.

with the spirit of free men. ... It was the voluntary character of the British forces which stood as a bar between the nation and the despoilers of liberty.”²⁵

Labour anti-conscriptionists paid close attention to developments in Britain. And the decision in January 1916 to introduce conscription there brought discussion about British tradition to the fore. “The news ... comes as a painful shock to all who love the British nation,” said the *Worker*. The introduction of conscription would rob British workers “of a precious heritage of freedom.”²⁶ A month later it observed that “those ancient liberties which were once the pride and prerogative of the race already seem to have become pale shadows ... [in] a country in which the instinct of the people for freedom had withstood a thousand shocks of tyranny.”²⁷

The introduction of conscription in Britain had a number of more specific consequences. First, it gave the labour press a special interest in the ongoing opposition of the British labour movement and especially the Trades Union Congress (TUC).²⁸ Second, it placed the labour movement on high alert and made it deeply sceptical about apparent offers of exemption (such as those to married men, which in Britain, though ostensibly central to the initial argument for conscription, were renounced within months) or the significance of measures which were purportedly nothing to do with conscription (such as the collection of data on available military manpower).²⁹ Protestations of good faith were less credible in light of the British experience. Observing this experience reduced the likelihood of giving incremental moves towards conscription the benefit of the doubt and made the Australian labour movement less susceptible to ‘salami’ tactics. Third, and most importantly, it forced anti-conscriptionists to alter the way in which they invoked Britishness. Henceforth, they could not simply invoke British tradition, they had to invoke it against British practice. As a result, the conflict between pro-conscriptionists

²⁵ *AW*, 6 Jan 1916, 1.

²⁶ Both previous quotes in *AW*, 6 Jan 1916, 1.

²⁷ *AW*, 3 Feb 1916, 1.

²⁸ See, for example, *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 13 & 15 and *AW*, 3 Feb 1916, 16, and later on the British decision to extend conscription to married men, *AW*, 11 May 1916, 13, and *AW* 25 May 1916, 13.

²⁹ See the repeated references to the ‘Derby Dodge’ – the British review conducted by Lord Derby which had (as was intended but contrary to what was stated) paved the way for conscription. *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 11 & 15; 10 Feb 1916, 11; 23 March 1916, 1; 27 April 1916, 11; and 11 May 1916, 1.

and anti-conscriptionists became, in part, a conflict between different kinds of British loyalty: loyalty to what Britain was doing versus loyalty to British ideas.

The juxtaposition of conscription and British ideas was clearly present in the first major union resolution against conscription, which declared that the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) "absolutely opposes the principle of conscription as being opposed to the spirit of our time and race".³⁰ It was also invoked at the Brisbane Industrial Council, where an Australia-wide conference on conscription was first suggested. "As a Britisher, proud of his country and her great tradition of freedom," said a delegate, "he had always been undeviatingly opposed to compulsion, which was anti-British".³¹ A resolution opposing the government's war census questionnaires as tantamount to conscription was carried unanimously. And this juxtaposition remained a feature thereafter. The main Queensland anti-conscription appeal urged citizens to "stand faithful" to "all those glorious traditions of the British race that lie behind us".³² And the *Labor Call* argued that "Conscription would be a betrayal of the very principle on which Britain has prided herself – freedom of conscience for all ...don't betray your Christianity and your British traditions ... [and] give up your glorious freedom."³³ This reasoning had a broad resonance. In a public address, the NSW Chief Justice, Sir William Cullen, noted that "many people wanted to submit the population to iron discipline. He did not think that a British people would. They valued their liberty too much."³⁴

However the anti-conscriptionists still faced a problem. This formulation of the defence of British tradition went some way towards neutralising loyalist ripostes. But it still left them vulnerable to a simple-minded loyalism that would brook no criticism of any sort.

³⁰ 'Race', here, meant the 'British race'. *AW*, 3 Feb 1916, 19. The resolution was passed by the AWU in January 1916 shortly after the British parliament legislated for conscription. See also the Manifesto of the National Executive of the Australian Trade Union Congress on Conscription, *Report of Proceedings*, 4, which contrasts the reality with the sentiment in the land where 'Britons never will be slaves'.

³¹ See delegate Pidgeon in *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 5. See also the similar comment by delegate Read, and Leslie C. Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription in Australia* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1935), 120-26. The Council was responding to the government's decision to send out war census cards asking all men whether they were prepared to enlist, when, and if not why not.

³² *AW*, 28 Sept 1916, 3.

³³ *LC*, 12 Oct 1916, 11.

³⁴ *LC*, 25 May 1916, 4.

In the often infantile debate surrounding loyalism, one complexity could be one complexity too many. A potential solution to this problem was to shift the focus from the British tradition itself to what everyone agreed was its opposite – continental despotism. This had the effect of shifting attention from what everyone said they were for to what everyone said they were against. While the focus was on Britain, anti-conscriptionists remained susceptible to a certain kind of criticism: you say that you're for Britain but you won't support what it's doing. With this change of focus, it was the pro-conscriptionists who were susceptible to this kind of criticism: you say that you're against despots but you want us to do what they're doing.

'Continental despotism' was long established in the popular imagination – including the popular conservative imagination – as the antithesis of Britishness. And the institution of conscription was widely seen as one of its defining characteristics. Catholic absolutists, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Czars had all played a part in confirming Britain's special status as the land of the free. Now, of course, the great continental despot was the Kaiser. But the paradigm was still Napoleon – the central opponent in the last long military conflict in which Britain had been involved. It was a conflict that had penetrated deep into people's lives and unleashed huge social changes – a massive two decade long globe-spanning war in itself, as well as the culmination of a conflict of many decades more with the absolutist rulers of France.³⁵

Anti-conscriptionists made great use of this reasoning. It can already be seen in Boote's earliest reaction to the introduction of conscription in Britain and in the reasoning behind the AWU's agenda setting anti-conscription resolution.³⁶ Indeed it predated this.³⁷ And it was a regular feature thereafter. "What is German militarism based on but conscription ... should this free land be submitted to the very curse that it is voluntarily sacrificing the pick of its manhood to crush," asked a letter in the *Worker*. In order to stop itself from

³⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1, 5 & 310-13.

³⁶ See *AW*, 6 Jan 1916, 1 and *AW*, 3 Feb 1916, 19. See also *AW*, 27 April 1916 on the Victorian PLC resolution.

³⁷ See for example, the 1915 No Conscription Fellowship (NCF) pamphlet, 'Do you want German rule?' in Riley papers, NLA, MS 759, box 52, folder, 7, and in the ILP statement reprinted in *LC*, 29 July 1915, inside back cover.

being Prussianised, Australia had to Prussianise itself. “Anticipatory” Prussianism. This was the Prime Minister’s “Wonderful logic!” “They yell patriotism with one breath and act Prussianism with another,” wrote the *Labor Call*’s editor, William Wallis. It is “Prussianism in excelsis,” said a former Member of the House of Representatives.³⁸

After his return to Australia, and especially after finally and definitely declaring himself for conscription on 30 August, this criticism increasingly attached itself to the person of Hughes. It was further fuelled by Hughes increasingly authoritarian approach to the referendum, with pre-emptive call ups and fingerprinting, show trials of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), attempts to manipulate the soldiers’ vote, and, in a move that left him without half his cabinet, interference in the polling process itself. Sometimes he is characterised as a Kaiser or said to have embraced other Prussian qualities.³⁹ But more often still he is said to have become a Napoleon.

The continuing currency of Napoleon as the paradigm of continental despotism is apparent among otherwise disparate opinion-formers. Both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Labor Call* sought to understand the outbreak of the war by comparing it with the struggle against Napoleonic tyranny. The *Labor Call* even contrived to farewell the first departing AIF volunteers by invoking Nelson. “Australia expects,” it intoned.⁴⁰ Both may have been influenced by leading conservative opinion-formers in Britain, who reached for this analogy from the outset.⁴¹

³⁸ *AW*, 24 Aug 1916, 15; *LC*, 26 Oct 1916, 2; *LC*, 25 May 1916, 4; and *LC*, 28 Sept 1916, 2. See also Maurice Blackburn’s argument, citing G.K.Chesterton, that “Conscription is not a way of conquering the Germans, but a way of conquering the English” in *AW*, 1 June 1916, 19. This ‘Prussian’ argument was also represented in a number of cartoons – see, for example, *LC*, 4 May 1916, 1; *LC*, 24 Aug 1916, 1 – culminating in the well known cartoon “Prussianism Defeated” in the *LC*, 16 Nov 1916, 1.

³⁹ *LC*, 5 Oct 1916, 4; *LC*, 12 Oct 1916, 8; *AW*, 19 Oct 1916, 1.

⁴⁰ See *SMH*, 25 Dec 1914 in Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, 54; and *LC*, 17 Sept 1914, inside cover.

⁴¹ See the London *Times* editorial on 5 August 1914. As the Conservative leader Bonar Law put it in the British parliament, “it was Napoleonism once again, but without Napoleon.” See Hansard, House of Commons, 6 August 1914.

Anti-conscriptionists seized on this language. Hughes was “Australia’s political Napoleon”, the “new Napoleon” or “the Napoleonic Hughes”.⁴² Perhaps he was not wholly displeased. As he crossed the Pacific to Vancouver *en route* to the UK, a fancy dress ball was held on Hughes’ boat. “I nearly broke my heart at not being able to go as Napoleon,” he wrote to Pearce.⁴³ A striking cartoon by Claude Marquet captures the essence of the continental despotism critique in this personalised form. [See Figure X.] The cartoon first appeared in the *Worker* and was then reprinted after the result in the *Labor Call* and the *Socialist* – testimony to the centrality of its core message and the wide ranging appeal of this reasoning. Commenting on the result, the *Labor Call* declared simply that “The Australian Napoleon has met his Waterloo”.⁴⁴

The New World

The second way in which anti-conscriptionists interpreted their central liberal argument and gave it a geography was by associating it with the advantages that the New World had over the Old. The social hierarchy and political autocracy of the Old World had long been identified as inhospitable to liberty. These characteristics both fostered and partly depended on militarism and the institution of conscription that lay at its core. By contrast the more egalitarian and democratic social and political structure of the New World was more conducive to liberty. But if conscription and militarism were grafted onto such a society it would jeopardise these freedom-fostering features and threaten regression into the Old World morass from which its citizens and their forebears had extricated themselves. Under conscription, “the European officer lords it over private and civilian alike.” In short, it “makes a man a serf” or “a beast” and it “lowers his manhood”.⁴⁵ This

⁴² *LC*, 17 Aug 1916, 4 & 10; *LC*, 16 Oct 1916, 4. See also the background image in the cartoon in *AW*, 5 Oct 1916, 17.

⁴³ L.F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger, 1914-1952* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1979), 71. This was, of course, partly in jest, but Hughes certainly saw himself as a leader apart. Having attended the British Cabinet, he told Lloyd George that the problem was that “there must be one man to make the final decision and furnish the driving force”. See *ibid*, 95-96. And this view was no doubt reinforced by his ever-present private secretary and confidant who viewed Hughes as an exceptional man in the mould of a Carlylean hero. See Meaney, *World Crisis*, 174.

⁴⁴ *AW*, 19 Oct 1916, 1; *LC*, 2 Nov 1916, 3 & 4; *Socialist*, 17 Nov 1916, 1.

⁴⁵ See Wallis in *LC*, 27 April 1916, 6 and *LC*, 18 May 1916, 8. Note that the language of manhood was often used in two competing ways. Sometimes, as here, it referred to independence or autonomy. For pro-

was “Europe’s ghastly conscription fate” and, to avoid it, Australians must “slay the old world devil”.⁴⁶

Prior to the First World War, the standard point of reference for these arguments was the United States. The idea that Australia had the potential to be “another America” and the practice of looking there for inspiration was already well established in the early 1890s. Left-wing reform thought emanating from the United States was particularly influential. Indeed for a time it was probably the most influential external source of left-wing ideological influence. For example, the *Worker* and its forerunner, the *Hummer*, were particularly keen on drawing inspiration from experiments with labour populist politics in the United States. The very spelling of the Labor Party’s name may well be testimony to this American influence.⁴⁷

However the dilemmas facing anti-conscriptionists made them wary of looking to the United States for lessons. Partly this was simply a consequence of censorship, which made access to some US journals difficult and reprinting US articles risky. Leading American publications like the *Appeal to Reason* were deemed a ‘prohibited import’ by the Australian censor.⁴⁸ But over and above this, appealing to American experience now had a double disadvantage. It was not just that, with the passions unleashed by the war, any appeal to the United States carried the whiff of disloyalty to Britain. It was also, more fundamentally, that, with the United States remaining neutral and Wilson campaigning for re-election on a ‘he kept us out of the war’ platform, appealing to American

conscriptionists it often referred to physical courage or willingness to fight (indeed willingness to die). But the distinction between pro- and anti- conscriptionists was not clear cut. For example, in the latter anti-conscription article cited here it is actually used in both ways in the course of the article.

⁴⁶ See Boote’s poem ‘Up, Australia!’ in *AW*, 28 Sept 1916, 17. Note that Labor Call’s Wallis was particularly enamoured of these New World arguments, although they were also used by Boote in the *Worker* and VSP activists like Villiers. See also Villiers in 5 Oct 1916, 6, and Wallis in *LC*, 25 May 1916, 4 and *LC*, 26 Oct 1916, 4. Note also that the title of the *Worker*’s war news page into the early weeks of 1916 was headed ‘Fighting in the Old World for the New’. See 6 Jan 1916, 13 and subsequent weeks.

⁴⁷ Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 17, 163, 209-14.

⁴⁸ Frank Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1983), 128. With a run of about three quarters of a million in 1913, the *Appeal to Reason* had the widest circulation of any socialist publication in the US. See John Graham, ed., “*Yours for the Revolution*”: *The Appeal to Reason, 1895-1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 15, 174.

experience threatened to damage the anti-conscription cause by confusing it with an anti-war stance.⁴⁹

There were still references to the United States in the Australian labour press. But these were now limited to brief updates on American labour, socialist or political news. Typical are brief reports that organised labour is growing in New York, Debs is not running for President, and Wilson favours preparedness.⁵⁰ Occasionally, US attitudes to the war were smuggled in through short notes or cartoons, although these are simply mentioned without comment.⁵¹ But developments in the United States are almost never cited as a model or made part of an argument by analogy about what Australia ought to do. The one time US lessons are directly invoked, it is not at the initiative of the anti-conscriptionists, but in an attempt to rebut claims that Prime Minister Hughes had introduced about the significance of conscription during the American Civil War.⁵²

Instead of the United States, it was Canada that now loomed large. Canada was the country which provided the closest match with Australia during these years. And Canada, it seemed clear, had rejected conscription. Conservative Prime Minister Borden, Liberal Opposition leader Laurier, Acting Prime Minister Rogers, Canadian Defence Minister Hughes, and Canadian labour leaders were all quoted to the same effect.⁵³ In particular, the statements in parliament by the Prime Minister and Leader of Opposition that neither had any intention of introducing conscription were repeated over and over again. If “loyal

⁴⁹ Wariness of appealing to American experience continued after the US entered the war, not now because of its anti-war stance, but because of its immediate embrace of conscription.

⁵⁰ See *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 20; *LC*, 27 April 1915, 5; *AW*, 3 Feb 1916, 13.

⁵¹ See, for example, Socialist Congressman Meyer London's call for a conference of neutrals in *AW*, 9 March 1916, 2. Most notable in this regard were the small reprinted cartoons from the US labour press, and especially from the *Masses*, which sometimes appeared. See also the report on a meeting with the editor of the *Masses* in *AW*, 8 June 1916, 17.

⁵² *AW*, 28 Sept 1916, 3; *AW*, 5 Oct 1916, 17; *LC*, 28 Sept 1916, 3 & 9. There is also an exception at the very beginning of the war in *LC*, 13 Aug 1914, 4 which argues that Australia should aspire to be independent like the US. And there is a partial exception in *LC*, 5 Oct 1916, 6 which praises the American pioneers who “made freedom a greater virtue than patriotism”.

⁵³ *AW*, 30 March 1916, 4; *LC*, 12 Oct 1916, 4; *AW*, 12 Oct 1916, 12.

Canada ... declines to put on the shackles of militarism” why should Australia.⁵⁴ This, thought one anti-conscriptionist, was their “best argument”.⁵⁵

In fact, Canada did eventually introduce conscription. A bill was passed in July 1917, although it was not implemented until January 1918, after Borden successfully took the issue to the country in a controversial federal election on 17 December 1917. And this, of course, meant that appeals to Canada by Australian anti-conscriptionists fell away during the second referendum campaign in December 1917. But in 1916, there was no indication that any such changes were in the offing, and Borden’s subsequent ‘conversion’ to conscription was quite unexpected within Canada itself.⁵⁶

Prior to the first referendum, “Canada’s Commonsense” was invoked repeatedly in Australia both in stand-alone articles and to augment other arguments in the labour press,⁵⁷ by socialist and Christian peace activists,⁵⁸ at major rallies,⁵⁹ and every week during the referendum campaign itself.⁶⁰

Other British dominions provided additional points of reference. But many of these had problems of their own. And none of these countries was invoked as repeatedly as the Canadian case. New Zealand was discussed at some length. But this was not because it was a model but because it was a source of concern and vexation. The labour press followed the process that led to the enactment of conscription in August 1916 and its

⁵⁴ See T.J. Miller, “Conscription – Its Effects on Industry and Business” in Riley papers MS 759 NLA, folder 6/3.

⁵⁵ LC, 14 Sept 1916, 3.

⁵⁶ See J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977); Jatinder Mann, “‘To the last man and the last shilling’ and ‘Ready, aye ready’: Australian and Canadian Conscription Debates during the First World War,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 61 (2015): 184-200; and John Connor, “Why was it easier to introduce and implement conscription in some English-speaking countries than others?” in *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, eds Robin Archer *et al* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2016), 160-7.

⁵⁷ For quote see AW, 14 Sept 1916, 5. In addition to the references in this and the previous paragraph, see LC, 18 May 1916, 8; LC, 24 Aug 1916, 3; LC, 21 Sept 1916, 4; LC, 28 Sept 1916, 2 and LC, 26 Oct 1916, 2.

⁵⁸ See T.J. Miller in Riley papers, MS 759 NLA, folder 6/3, and NCF in AW, 20 April 1916, 4.

⁵⁹ For Sydney see AW, 17 Aug 1916, 1 & 15. For Melbourne see AW, 7 Sept 1916, 5.

⁶⁰ In the *Worker*, for example, see AW, 5 Oct 1916, 2; AW, 12 Oct 1916, 12; AW, 19 Oct 1916, 2; and AW, 26 Oct 1916, 19.

implementation in November, and offered advice to affected trans-Tasman unionists.⁶¹ In the lead up to the referendum, it tried to contain the significance of the New Zealand decision by engaging in a kind of wishful thinking. It highlighted the fact that the decision had yet to be implemented and the calls from NZ labour leaders for a ‘no’ vote, implying that the Australian referendum would decide the fate of conscription in New Zealand as well.⁶² South Africa had not introduced conscription. But this was only occasionally mentioned. It was not so clearly an analogous case and it conjured up the controversy and accusations of disloyalty surrounding the Boer war. In addition, Ireland was also free of conscription. And this was sometimes invoked. Though still a part of the United Kingdom, it was exempted from the provisions of Britain’s conscription laws until late in the war. But what is striking, overall, especially given all the discussion of the ‘Irish vote’, is how infrequently the Irish example is highlighted or even mentioned.⁶³ Striking, but not, perhaps, surprising. After all, Ireland, especially after the Easter Uprising, raised the very issues of disloyalty that anti-conscriptionists were trying to avoid and it threatened, in addition, to involve them in sectarian strife.

The Arguments Compared

Both the ‘Continental despotism’ and ‘Canadian commonsense’ arguments served to minimise the target which anti-conscriptionists presented to their loyalist opponents. By limiting the grounds on which they would be susceptible to attack, they took care to avoid opening up distracting extra fronts. Each could appeal to proponents of both the British tradition and the New World interpretations of the liberalism argument. Neither required anti-conscriptionists to take a stand on whether Britain itself was worth emulating or part of the problematic Old World. Continental despotism could be seen as the enemy of the New World as well of as the British tradition. And Canada could be seen as a British as well as a New World model. Each enabled anti-conscriptionists to finesse the dilemma

⁶¹ AW, 20 Jan 1916, 4; AW, 3 Feb 1916, 2; AW, 18 May 1916, 3; AW, 22 June 1916, 15; and AW, 14 Sept 1916, 10.

⁶² AW, “Waiting for Australia”, 5 Oct 1916, 17; AW, “Vote No”, 26 Oct 1916, 15; LC, “Ten Reasons”, 26 Oct 1916, 9 (“it is not in operation”).

⁶³ It was given somewhat more attention in the *Labor Call* than the *Worker*. Compare AW, 11 May 1916, 1; 18 May 1916, 13; AW 12 Oct 1916, 14; and AW, 26 Oct 1916, 10 with LC, 18 May 1916, 8; LC, 21 Sept 1916, 4; LC, 28 Sept 1916, 8; and LC, 12 Oct 1916, 4.

they faced, though they did so in different ways. In particular, while the Canadian argument dealt with the loyalism dilemma by focusing on the best positive model of what to emulate, the continental despotism argument dealt with it by focusing on the paradigm negative model of what to avoid.

Arguably, however, the continental despotism argument had a number of additional advantages. First, social movements often find that a negative argument that focuses on a common enemy is a better mobilising tool because it helps them to unify the broadest group of supporters. Hence the frequency of slogans that say ‘no to this’ or ‘ban that’. Second, unlike the Canadian argument, the Continental despotism argument was not susceptible to changes of policy that might occur elsewhere. Third, it enabled anti-conscriptionists to draw on widespread and well entrenched popular attitudes towards military matters – attitudes reflected in the special status of Napoleon in public debate and the seemingly countless Nelson streets and Wellington roads.⁶⁴ Just how widespread they were is evident from the way in which Labor appealed to them itself during the 1914 federal election campaign.⁶⁵ And fourth, it provided an intellectually powerful immanent critique of the conscriptionists own arguments. If defeating Prussian militarism was the purpose of the war, then how could it be right to introduce Prussian military methods ourselves? We cannot destroy Prussian militarism, they argued, by adopting Prussian militarism ourselves. The continental despotism argument enabled anti-conscriptionists to show that the premises of their opponents own arguments seemed to lead to conclusions that were the opposite of those they drew. Moreover, this critique enabled them to take the crude allegation of disloyalty to which they were subjected and throw it back at their opponents. ‘It’s *you* who are pro-Kaiser!’ they could say in riposte.

⁶⁴ The 2011 Gregory’s street directory lists 39 Nelsons and 32 Wellingtons in Sydney alone. Billy Hughes last house was on one of them. And I grew up near one of each! See also Craig Wilcox, *Red Coat Dreaming* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29-32.

⁶⁵ See Federal Election Ephemera, 1914, NLA, “The Call to Duty” which ends ‘Australia expects every citizen to vote the useless fusion out.’

The rhetorical importance of the continental despotism argument can be seen from the extensive efforts that pro-conscriptionists made to address and refute it.⁶⁶ They constantly found themselves having to justify the claim that though they favoured conscription, it would be different to conscription elsewhere. They did not want it in its “continental form”. Nobody wants “continental conscription” they said. They were for “democratic conscription” not “military conscription”, for “Australian” not “German conscription”, or for “British National Service” not “the Prussian brand”.⁶⁷

In the process, they often felt it necessary to acknowledge the force of their opponents claims. Conscription was “unpalatable” agreed one of the earliest pro-conscription responses to Boote’s editorial line.⁶⁸ Former Secretary Vivash of the Victorian Railways Union, whose letters to the *Worker* sparked the most sustained debate in the labour press, accepted that “compulsory service ... is not a nice thing at any time” before going on to explain why he thought it was now necessary nevertheless.⁶⁹ A pamphlet issued by the pro-conscription National Referendum Council argued that “the ineffaceable character of our race will save us from any mischief that militarism may have brought to others. ... The militarism of Germany is a world-menace ... British militarism will be a miracle-working wand”.⁷⁰ Characteristically, this seemed to concede as much as it refuted.

Conclusion

Liberty-based arguments lay at the heart of labour movement opposition to conscription. They were not the only reasons for this opposition, but they were persistent and central reasons from the outset. However, in making these arguments, labour anti-conscriptionists had to confront a dilemma. The dilemma was partly a function of their

⁶⁶ Note also the pro-conscriptionist attempt to forge evidence to contradict the Canadian argument. See *AW*, 14 December 1916, 15.

⁶⁷ See respectively, O’Brien, *AW*, 9 March 1916, 15; Vivash, *AW*, 11 May 1916, 18; Fitzgerald, *AW*, 11 May 1916, 19; D.H. Newman, *The Socialist Case For Conscription* (Melbourne: Specialty Press, 1916), 3; and Henry Howard, *British Service versus German Conscription* (Adelaide: National Referendum Council, 1916), 5.

⁶⁸ O’Brien, *AW*, 13 Jan 1916, 18.

⁶⁹ *AW*, 15 June 1916, 15.

⁷⁰ Howard, *British Service*, 5-6.

attempt to simultaneously straddle commitments to Australian nationalism and empire loyalism. But it was the public rhetoric of their opponents – and their great rallying cry of ‘loyalty’ – that gave it particular salience. How could labour anti-conscriptionists parry the charge of disloyalty that was central to the argument of their opponents? They reached for two ways of framing their argument in order to do so.

The first emphasized the Britishness of the liberal tradition and especially the association of conscription with its antithesis – continental despotism. Once Britain itself had introduced conscription, this argument became more complicated, since anti-conscriptionists now had to invoke British tradition against British practice. Shifting the focus to continental despotism enabled them to avoid this difficulty. More than this, it enabled them to argue that it was the proponents of conscription, by seeking to introduce the kinds institutions and values that the war was being fought to defeat, who were doing the work of the Prussians.

The second way that labour anti-conscriptionists interpreted their central argument emphasized the liberal tradition’s affinity with the New World and especially the continuing rejection of conscription in Canada. In the past, the United States had been the standard New World point of reference. But censorship and the danger of confusing opposition to conscription with opposition to the war, made them wary of that comparison. Instead, the then ongoing rejection of conscription by both the government and the opposition in ‘loyal Canada’ became the comparison of choice.

Both the ‘continental despotism’ and the ‘Canadian commonsense’ arguments served to minimize the target anti-conscriptionists presented to their loyalist opponents. Each could appeal to both the British tradition and the New World interpretations of their central liberal argument. The continental despotism argument may have had a number of additional advantages. And proponents of conscription often felt it necessary to make extensive efforts to try to refute it. However, both arguments helped anti-conscriptionists deal with the dilemma they faced. While the Canadian commonsense argument focused on what to emulate, the continental despotism argument focused on what to avoid.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the LSE for research leave, the ANU for a visiting fellowship, and the Academy of Social Sciences for sponsoring the expert workshop out of which this article grew. My thanks also to the National Library of Australia, the Noel Butlin Archives and the Mitchell Library, and, for their detailed comments and advice, to the workshop participants, especially Frank Bongiorno, Murray Goot, Marian Sawer, and Sean Scalmer, as well as the *Journal's* three reviewers. Finally, special thanks to my mother, Olga Archer, and to dear Elisabeth and Benji.