



DISTANT LINES

Queensland voices of the First World War



LEARNING NOTES Infozone, level 1 Guide script (all grades)

Themes explored (1914–1918):

- The conscription debate

Welcome to Infozone. In this area we are going to look at the conscription debate.

CONSCRIPTION DEBATE

This area is all about reasons presented to the Australian public during the First World War for and against conscription.

What is conscription?

When a country does not have enough people willing to go to war they might enforce conscription. Conscription is compulsory military service – a law that says if you are able to fight then you must. If you don't fight then there will be penalties, usually jail.

Australia enforced conscription during the Vietnam War; a war waged in Vietnam during the late 1960s, early 1970s. This policy sent many young men who did not want to go to war overseas to fight. Conscription was very unpopular then, just as it was during the First World War. Why did the government want to enforce conscription anyway? Let's find out.

At the beginning of the First World War, Australian law required all young Australians to participate in national service WITHIN Australia, if Australia came under direct attack. This means that if Australia itself was threatened, all young men who were able to would have to fight to defend it. In the First World War, the war was being waged many miles away. Therefore, although Australia was at war, it was not under DIRECT attack. Under the laws of the time the government could not force men to go to war. All men and women who went to war had to do so voluntarily.

Initially this wasn't a problem as many men were keen to enlist. But as the war dragged on and the true horrors became apparent, the numbers of men willing to enlist fell. This was a problem for the government at the time and in particular the Labor Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, who had promised the British government that Australia would provide approximately 7,000 new recruits per month. With enlistment numbers falling, Australia was having trouble filling its quota and so the Prime Minister asked the government to change the laws to enact conscription; in other words, to force eligible men to serve overseas on the front line, even if they didn't want to.

His government refused. Billy Hughes knew that the only way his government could pass a conscription law was if they had the clear support of the public. One way governments can find out what the public is thinking is by holding a referendum.

A referendum requires everyone of voting age to vote, 'Yes' or 'No' to a question. The question Billy Hughes asked Australia to vote on was whether to enforce conscription.

Billy Hughes was confident Australia would vote 'Yes' and so he set a date for the referendum. Suddenly posters, such as those you see here, sprang up all over Australia detailing reasons for and against conscription. Public meetings were held to discuss the topic and the question of whether to vote 'Yes' or 'No' was discussed in every corner of the nation.

The posters, newspaper clippings, letters and cartoons found in this zone present reasons either for or against the vote. Let's have a look at one of the cartoons that was shown in Queensland at the time.

Locate and point to Trojan Horse Cartoon.

To understand this cartoon you need to know about The White Australia Policy and the story of the Trojan Horse.

Who can quickly tell me what the story of the Trojan Horse is about?

The Trojan Horse is found in an ancient Greek myth about a ten-year war which was fought between the people of Troy and the people of Greece. The Greeks won the war when they gave the people of Troy a large wooden horse. The people of Troy thought it was a peace offering but when night fell, the myth states that hundreds of Greek soldiers climbed out of the horse, destroying the city and ending the war.

Who can tell me what The White Australia Policy was all about?

The White Australia Policy was a group of laws which aimed to keep Australia full of white people, largely of British heritage and to remove or not allow non-white people to enter the country.

Have a look at the cartoon. What is happening in this cartoon?

Do you think this cartoon is encouraging people to vote 'Yes' or 'No'?

It is encouraging people to vote 'No'.

Why is it asking people to vote 'No'? What does the illustrator think will happen if people vote 'Yes'?

The illustrator thinks that if we send all the young eligible white men to war, then many will be severely injured or die leaving no-one left in Australia to work. This in turn would mean that Australia would need to let in non-white people to do the jobs needed to get Australia back on its feet.

Now let's have a look at one of the posters that was around at that time.

Move students in front of the 'Why I Should Vote Yes' poster.

Is this poster encouraging people to vote 'Yes' or 'No'?

This poster lists several reasons put forward at the time for why people should vote YES for conscription. Let's have a look at some of them now.

Who can read point 4 for me?

What do you think this means?

This point states that we should vote for conscription to send reinforcements to help the men already serving at the front.

Who can read point 5 for me?

What Empire does this refer to?

The Empire refers to the British Empire of which Australia was a part. It suggests that if one part of the Empire was in trouble, as England was when Germany declared war, then the other countries of the Empire should assist.

Who would like to read points 6 and 7?

A self-governing dominion is a country which governs itself, just as Australia does today and did back in 1915. What these two points suggest is that other countries, like Australia, had already enacted conscription, therefore Australia should too.

Who can read point 9 for me?

The point suggests that if you voted 'No' then you were being disloyal and that you were pro-German which means you supported the Germans who at that time were the enemy.

Who does it suggest people were being disloyal to?

It suggests people who voted 'No' were being disloyal to the British Empire and also possibly the men and women already serving at the front.

Now I'm not going to tell you the result of the referendum. The reason I'm not going to tell you is that I want you to come up with an answer yourself. I want you to consider all that you read, see and discover today and to decide if you would vote 'No' or 'Yes' for conscription. At the end of your visit, I will ask you to cast your vote using the voting card in this booklet.

Show Activity Passbook and the ballot box.

Give students a few minutes to review this display.

CONCLUDE

Conclude your visit to this room by quickly reviewing what students have learnt. Key points are as follows:

Conscription referenda: During the war Australia was asked to vote whether to enforce conscription. The debate divided the nation.

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