

KILLING CONSCRIPTION: THE EASTER RISING AND IRISH CATHOLIC ATTITUDES TO THE CONSCRIPTION DEBATES IN AUSTRALIA, 1916-1917

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Introduction

During the First World War the Australian government twice asked the Australian people by plebiscite to approve the introduction of military conscription for overseas service. On each occasion, in October 1916 and December 1917, the Australian people by a narrow margin said no.¹

After the defeat of the first referendum supporters of conscription casting around for a scapegoat to blame for their loss found one in the Irish Catholic community, which at the time made up about 22 per cent of Australian voters. Even the prime minister, William Morris Hughes, agreed, claiming that ‘the selfish vote, and shirker vote and the Irish vote were too much for us’.² In August 1917 Hughes told his British counterpart David Lloyd George, ‘The [Catholic] Church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription’³

But it was not only supporters of conscription who believed that it was Irish Catholics embittered by Britain’s treatment of Ireland in the wake of the Easter rising who swung the vote. The *Catholic Press*, which had opposed conscription, declared soon after the vote, ‘And when the referendum campaign was swinging the electors, now “Yes”, now “No”, one heard with insistent frequency the question, “How can I vote ‘Yes’ while Ireland is under martial law?”’⁴ Labor’s Frank Anstey wrote, ‘[I]f there had been no Easter Week in Ireland ... there would have been no hope of defeating conscription in Australia’.⁵

As we prepare to mark the centenary of the first conscription referendum next Friday week it is a good time for us as members of the Australian Catholic Historical Society to reflect on Catholic attitudes to conscription and to examine whether it was the Catholic Church, as Hughes claimed, which killed conscription and whether the Easter Rising had influenced the result.

Conscription referendum 1916

When in August 1916 Prime Minister Hughes returned from a visit to London, having been persuaded by the Army Council of the necessity

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for increased Australian reinforcements, he was determined to introduce conscription for overseas service—despite the difficulty he knew he faced in gaining the support of his own Labor Party and of the labour movement generally.⁶ Because anti-conscription Labor senators held the balance of power in the Senate Hughes did not have the numbers to pass the necessary legislation.

He therefore decided to take the issue to the people in a plebiscite, hoping thereby ‘to coerce the hostile Senate if the vote turned out to be in favour of conscription’.⁷ Pro-conscriptionists were disappointed believing Hughes should have tested the resolve of the anti-conscription senators by having a proclamation issued immediately on his return to Australia. They argued that the Australian people would have accepted it and the senators would have fallen into line.⁸

Preliminary points

At the outset, two preliminary points should be made. Firstly, the vote on conscription was not a constitutional referendum. The parliament already had power under the Constitution to pass the necessary legislation. The impediment to its doing so was not constitutional but political. Hughes did not have the numbers in the Senate.

Today Australians tend to use the term ‘plebiscite’ to describe such a non-binding vote by the people on a particular issue, such as the proposed vote on same-sex marriage. This is to distinguish it from a constitutional referendum, which is binding and which has a specific requirement that not only must a majority of the voters support the proposal but so too must the voters in a majority of states – the so-called ‘double majority’.

However, in 1916 the term ‘plebiscite’ was hardly ever used even though the conscription vote was non-binding. The legislation enabling the vote on conscription was the *Military Service Referendum Act* and the prime minister and other campaigners as well as the press almost always used the term ‘referendum’ to refer to that vote.⁹ The only newspaper which did not do so was *Truth*, whose editor Samuel Albert Rosa criticised Prime Minister Hughes for using the word ‘referendum’, not because it was constitutionally inaccurate but because it was ungrammatical. According to Rosa a ‘referendum’ is the question being referred to the people while a ‘plebiscite’ is the mechanism for doing so. But, apart from Rosa’s dissent, ‘referendum’ was the generally accepted term.

Accordingly, when discussing the vote on conscription in its historical

context, it is quite proper to refer to it as they did then, namely as a 'referendum'.

The second point to note is that the principal issue was not whether Australia should have conscription. Under amendments to the *Defence Act* in 1909 supported by all parties, military training had been compulsory for men and boys since 1911. But under the Act it was limited to service within Australia. Hughes wanted the *Defence Act* amended so as to extend conscription to overseas service, but he believed, on good grounds, the Senate would vote it down.

Another option possibly available to Hughes was an order or regulation under the *War Precautions Act*. But, again he would be at the mercy of the Senate, which had the power to disallow such instruments.¹⁰

So, Hughes considered that his only course of action was to appeal above the heads of the senators to the people so as to put moral pressure on them. Whether the anti-conscription senators would have backed down as the prime minister hoped will never be known, for the vote went against conscription.

What we do know is that Hughes opted for a referendum and that during the lengthy campaign the issue divided the Australian people and split the governing Labor Party, with Hughes walking out of the caucus in November 1916 and joining forces with the conservative Liberal Party to form a 'win-the-war' party that later became known as the Nationalist Party.

Catholics and the defeat of conscription

After the vote was lost Hughes became obsessed with the role he perceived Australian Catholics of Irish descent had played and were playing in opposing his government's 'win-the-war' policies and himself personally.

In April 1917 he told his confidant in London Keith Murdoch, father of Rupert, that 'the bulk of Irish people led by Archbishop Mannix ... are attacking me with a venomous personal campaign'.¹¹ In August 1917 he told Lloyd George, '[T]he Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They—the Irish—have captured the political machinery of the Labor organisations—assisted by syndicalists and I.W.W. people'.¹²

The IWW were the Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary working class movement that originated in the United States in 1905 and came to Australia in 1907. They were syndicalists, a term which denotes the use by the working class of industrial rather than political action to overthrow capitalism. The IWW rose to prominence in Australia during

World War I when its members were accused of acts of sabotage, including arson, aimed at subverting the war effort.¹³

Even before the vote was taken Hughes had been mindful of the impact events in Ireland might have on Irish Catholic voters, a consideration advanced in some of the Catholic newspapers. For example, the editor of Adelaide's *Southern Cross* wrote two weeks before the vote:

No doubt the majority of Australian Catholics are opposed to conscription, but the reason will be found not in their Catholic principles, but in the fact that they are mainly Irishmen or descendants of Irishmen. Recent unhappy events in Ireland have revived the feeling against the British misrule of past centuries which it was hoped that the legislation of the last 25 years and the concession of Home Rule would obliterate.¹⁴

Hughes therefore sent a private message to the editor of the *Catholic Press*, one of Sydney's two Catholic newspapers, saying he would use his influence with the British government to have the Home Rule Act put into operation at once, if the *Catholic Press* ceased its opposition to conscription.¹⁵

New South Wales premier W A Holman, another supporter of conscription, instructed the state's agent-general in London to tell the British government that it would assist the 'Yes' vote if it were to end martial law in Ireland and commit itself to home rule. The New South Wales government also tried to convince Irish nationalist leader John Redmond to send a message to Australia supporting conscription. Redmond refused saying that he and his colleagues were busy opposing it for Ireland.¹⁶

A fortnight before the vote was taken Hughes told the commander of the Australian Imperial Force, Lieutenant General William Birdwood:

The overwhelming majority of the Irish votes in Australia which represents nearly 25 per cent of the total votes has been swung over by the Sinn Feiners and are going to vote No in order to strike a severe blow at Great Britain.¹⁷

Protestant pro-conscriptionists shared Hughes' concern. The anti-Catholic pamphleteer Critchley Parker warned Protestant Australians before the 1916 referendum, 'It has to be remembered that Roman Catholics are voting for Ireland, not Australia, on Saturday'.¹⁸ So too the Grand Master and the Grand Secretary of the Loyal Orange Institution of Queensland who warned their members and 'Protestants generally':

[A] large proportion of the Roman Catholics within the Empire (and more especially within the Irish section of that Church), are holding

back from participating in the War, and the extremists amongst them are doing all in their power to prevent the War being carried to a successful termination. ... The venomous anti-English hate which has been for generations instilled into the Irish Catholic by his priesthood is bearing its fruit.¹⁹

After the vote was taken criticism of the Irish Catholic community intensified. In explaining to its readers why 'Contrary to all forecasts of sanity and patriotism regarding the referendum, the friends of the Kaiser have won', the *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, a Methodist weekly published in Adelaide, observed:

Strong support throughout the Commonwealth came to the 'No' army from the Roman Catholics. ... It is common rumour that their priests, with few exceptions, were openly or secretly opposed to conscription.²⁰

And it was not only militant Protestant newspapers which ran that line. Melbourne's metropolitan weekly the *Leader* opined:

In Australia ... we are ... entitled to doubt whether Irish sympathy can be counted on in the vigorous prosecution of the war. ... Their attitude is dictated by racial animosities and political differences which a wiser judgment would have put aside under the critical conditions in which the whole nation is involved.²¹

These anti-Catholic and anti-Irish attitudes in the context of the war and the conscription referendum reflected views that were widespread in Australia even before the war and before the Easter rising. In 1913 the New South Wales member of parliament Thomas Henley MLA told a 'Grand Protestant Demonstration' in Sydney, 'The disloyalists of Australia are mostly Irish-Roman Catholics'. He put it down to the Catholic schools, which he described as 'seed-plots of disloyalty' where they taught the children 'to be disloyal to the Empire and to the Union Jack—the great Flag under whose protection they were growing up!' ²²

So, were Hughes and his supporters right when they claimed that the Irish Catholic community in Australia was involved in a sinister plot to undermine the war effort and to kill conscription?

The Irish question, Australia and the War

To answer this question we need to look at the context in which the claims were made. In the early 20th century there was a strong correlation between religious affiliation and the three main national or ethnic groups that constituted European society in Australia: the English, the Irish and the

Scots. Competition between these groups reflected not only theological differences but also complex ethnic rivalries, particularly those between Irish Catholics on the one hand, and English Anglicans and Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the other. These rivalries, pre-dating European settlement in Australia but reinforced by local events, became endemic in the Australian political system during the 19th and early 20th centuries, intensifying in the years immediately before the war.²³

When in 1912 the British government announced its intention to legislate for Irish home rule, a major controversy emerged in Australia between supporters and opponents of the proposal, who divided generally along ethno-religious lines. And it was not long before debate about the United Kingdom's constitution became entwined with local issues, particularly the demand by Catholics for state aid for their schools.

These sectarian tensions, which increased as the home rule debate dragged on, subsided after the outbreak of the war in August 1914. Partly this was due to the shelving of the issue in the United Kingdom—when the Home Rule Bill was enacted in September 1914 but suspended for the duration of the war—but also because Protestants and Catholics in Australia were prepared to set aside their differences to support the war effort.

For example, on 6 August 1914 the *Freeman's Journal*, one of Sydney's Catholic weeklies, opined:

Few facts are susceptible of clearer demonstration than that vital issues as to the future of this country are at stake. Should England be beaten in a duel with Germany, Australia, too, would have her turn. Colonies is one of the Kaiser's dreams. Where could that dream be better realised than in this country? Adieu, then to that Australian independence of which we are all proud.²⁴

However, in reality, the display of denominational unity was a fragile façade. Although the Catholic Church joined with the Protestant churches in supporting Australia's participation in the war, its commitment, unlike theirs, was not based on theological and imperial considerations. Most Protestant spokesman characterised the conflict as a righteous war against godless Prussianism, which they regarded as 'a threatening form of state religion ... inspired by a unique sense of mission to impose its hegemony by force over the world'.²⁵

Australian Catholics, on the other hand, had a pragmatic, even utilitarian, view of the international conflict, regarding the war in terms of Australian interests. If Britain lost the war Australia would be at the mercy of German

expansion in the western Pacific, where they already occupied a number of islands including a large part of New Guinea. Catholics also hoped that by sharing in the blood sacrifice they might enjoy increased tolerance and the satisfaction of their grievances, especially state aid for their schools.²⁶

On 9 August 1914 Michael Kelly, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, told his congregation, 'We must forget all personal considerations and stand together as a nation. In Australia our little differences must be set aside, and as fellow-citizens we must stand shoulder to shoulder.' However, his idea of setting aside differences had a distinctly Catholic flavour: 'If this war pleased God, the people of the various religions would have such esteem for one another that there would be no more disabilities put upon their schools, and the question would not be asked in connection with their public work whether a person was a Catholic or not.'²⁷

For the next twenty months talk of Irish Catholic disloyalty subsided, at least in public, as Catholics and Protestants lined up together at the recruiting offices to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force and to help the British Empire defeat Germany.²⁸ But the fragile truce in the sectarian conflict was broken following the Easter rising in April 1916.

When news of the outbreak of violence in Dublin during Easter week began to reach Australia, many leading Catholics of Irish descent condemned the rising, seeing it as a threat to the promised implementation of home rule. Even Archbishop Mannix, who soon would become closely identified with Irish republicanism, initially described the rising as deplorable and its leaders as misguided. However, the mood changed when General Sir John Maxwell began using harsh measures to restore order in Ireland. Following the execution of the leaders of the rising, the deportation of thousands of others and the imposition of martial law, Australian Catholics of Irish descent became openly critical of British rule in Ireland, provoking a Protestant backlash.²⁹

Sectarianism, which had lain dormant since the outbreak of the war, flared up and intensified as many Protestants regarded such criticism as disloyal to the British Crown, already under threat from without but now also from within. It was in this highly-charged atmosphere that the first conscription referendum was held.

Catholics and Conscription

As we have seen, one of the reasons Hughes gave to Lloyd George for the referendum's defeat was the influence of the Catholic Church. But there was nothing in Church teaching that prohibited compulsory military service

for defence at home or overseas, and during the referendum campaign the Vatican's representative in Australia, Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti, issued a statement making it clear that conscription was not an issue of faith or morals upon which the Church could direct its members.³⁰ Not surprisingly, therefore, Catholics held differing personal opinions on the government's proposal, including individual bishops, of whom only two expressed their views publicly in 1916.

Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth was reported in newspapers across Australia as saying, 'Whoever believes in the righteousness and justice of the war we are engaged in ought not to hesitate to vote for compulsory military service in Australia',³¹ while Archbishop Daniel Mannix, coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, spoke against conscription at just two public functions. At the opening of the September Fair at the Albert Hall, Clifton Hill on 16 September 1916, he told his audience that 'conscription is a hateful thing, and it is almost certain to bring evil in its train' and that 'Australia has done her full share – I am inclined to say more than her fair share in this war'.³² On 22 October in replying to an address presented to him in the parish hall at Preston he said that he stood by what he had previously said and that he intended to vote against conscription.³³

At the time Mannix was little known outside Victoria; certainly he was not the national figure he would become during the second referendum campaign in 1917. Among the Catholic laity there were also differences of opinion that found their way into the press, while Catholic newspapers adopted divergent viewpoints.³⁴ This reflected the way in which the country itself was divided over the issue.

Catholics opposed to conscription put forward a mixture of moral, political and economic arguments: compulsion was wrong; Australia had done its share and would be defenceless if more soldiers were sent to Europe; conscription would bring economic disaster to Australia; it would destroy trade unionism and lead to militarism; Australia would have to rely on foreign labour.³⁵ Although Catholic newspapers had criticised Britain's handling of events in Ireland during 1916, those newspapers opposed to conscription generally did not argue their case on anti-imperialist grounds. The *Catholic Press* and Adelaide's *Southern Cross* did, however, draw on two aspects of the Irish crisis to bolster the anti-conscription case, arguing firstly that if the 60,000 or more British troops enforcing martial law in Ireland were removed to France there would be no need to conscript Australians, and secondly that Australia's adoption of conscription would encourage England to introduce conscription in Ireland.³⁶

Although the Catholic Church's official silence was in stark contrast to the loud and almost monolithic support of conscription by leaders of the Protestant churches,³⁷ Hughes' claim that the Catholic Church was secretly against recruiting and that its influence killed conscription cannot be sustained. In fact, shortly after the 1916 campaign, he acknowledged as much when he wrote to Conservative Party leader Andrew Bonar Law, 'What an unholy alliance this is between men who have no religion [the IWW], who openly scoff at anything that savours of religion and the great Catholic Church. Of course it is not the Church AS SUCH but the Irish who see in England's peril Ireland's opportunity'.³⁸

Conscription and Irish Catholic vote

It soon became the orthodox view, among contemporaries and many historians, that the Irish Catholic vote was decisive and that the Easter rising and the British government's response to it was a major factor influencing Australian Catholics of Irish descent to oppose conscription. Even the *Catholic Press*, one of the few newspapers in New South Wales to oppose conscription but which hardly mentioned Ireland in its editorials on the issue, claimed Britain's treatment of Ireland had been decisive, declaring immediately after the vote, 'It would be futile to deny that the continuance of martial law in Ireland was perhaps the strongest factor in swelling the 'no-conscription' returns'.³⁹

On the fiftieth anniversary of the rising distinguished historian Ken Inglis wrote:

In Australia [the rising] had pulled the cork out of the bottle of sectarian hatred at exactly the moment when WM Hughes resolved that men must be compelled to fight for the Empire. ... Had it not been for the Sinn Feiners and Sir John Maxwell, Australian conscripts would have gone to France.⁴⁰

Subsequent research, however, has contradicted this view.⁴¹ While historians generally accept that the majority of Catholics in Australia voted against conscription, the research suggests that they were influenced more by their working-class background and other local factors than by events in Ireland or their religious adherence.

Labour historian Ian Turner questioned the orthodoxy in his 1962 PhD thesis, where he argued:

There is no general correlation between Catholicity and the 'No' vote: New South Wales and Victoria, both with a higher than average Catholic element in their populations, behaved oppositely, while the

biggest movement towards ‘No’ came in the South Australian country electorates, where the proportion of Catholics was well below the average.⁴²

In a detailed article examining the Irish Catholic vote in the referenda, historian Alan Gilbert wrote in 1969:

Most Irish-Catholics would have opposed conscription even if there had been no rising in Ireland during the War; some voted YES despite the Rising. Commitment to Labour politics, belief in the primacy of national over imperial interests, and concern about the possible conscription of Catholic teaching brothers were more important than Irish affairs in prompting many Catholics to vote NO.⁴³

Nevertheless, he added:

Irish affairs had a profound effect on the mood of Irish-Catholics in Australia, and secured for anti-conscription some of that fairly small minority of Irish-Catholic votes which would otherwise have endorsed the Government’s proposals.⁴⁴

However, in Patrick O’Farrell’s opinion, events in Ireland did not teach Australian Catholics anything they did not already know from their knowledge of Irish history and their own struggles over the previous fifty years. Rather, it served to remind them ‘that the dominant forces in Australian society sought to exclude or demean Catholics of Irish origin.’⁴⁵ Naomi Turner, in her two-volume history of Australian Catholicism, concurred: ‘Realistically, [Australian Catholics] looked at the Australian situation with its direct effects on them, rather than that of the Irish.’⁴⁶

In the same vein, Mark Lyons in his 1966 BA Honours thesis wrote: Ireland did play a large part in the consciousness of many of her children overseas, but the reason for this lies more in the position which these children occupied within the new society overseas, and it was that reality which was much more significant in forming their response to events within the new country.⁴⁷

In another undergraduate thesis in 1977, Virginia Murray argued:

Undoubtedly, the Easter Uprising reinforced ideas of Irish nationalism, hardened anti-British sentiments, and was an important factor in insulating the majority of Catholics from Imperial patriotism. The treatment that Ireland was to receive from England would have influenced some to vote NO.

But the problem extends beyond the Easter Uprising. For a greater understanding, attention must also be directed towards their sense

of Australian nationalism and the effect that the sectarian issue was to have upon them. Although these two factors were in some ways connected to the repercussions of the Easter Uprising, they were also important by themselves in moulding Catholic opinion.⁴⁸

These qualitative opinions are supported by quantitative research.

In his 1971 PhD thesis, Terry Metherall, who later became education minister in the New South Wales government, undertook a detailed examination of the voting patterns in each of the electorates. As regards the Irish Catholic vote, he concluded:

[I]f anything emerges clearly concerning the 'Roman Catholic vote' in the referenda it is that Catholics voted along lines of class and economic interest rather than religion. The Irish Catholic lot, in particular, was inextricably bound up with that of the Labor party because the Irish Catholics were almost all labourers, share croppers, small farmers and shopkeepers. As the attacks upon Archbishop Mannix by leading judges in Victoria and NSW suggested, when Catholics rose above the working class they adopted the values and prejudices of their higher station.⁴⁹

In 1982 Glenn Withers confirmed Metherall's conclusion with a statistical analysis of voting returns for each electorate. Using multi-variate regression analysis Withers found:

The results for [the] Catholic population, in particular, while consistently negative are relatively small in magnitude and not of great statistical significance. This is, of course, consistent with the views of those writers ... who stressed the Catholic vote may have been divided.⁵⁰

According to Withers the only statistically significant factor operating in favour of the No vote was membership of organised labour.

On the other hand, Jenny Tilby Stock in her quantitative analysis of the rural vote in South Australia based on electoral subdivisions found that "Germans" and Irish Catholics who belonged to cohesive ethnic-religious communities were distinctly less enamoured of conscription than were those of "British" birth and descent', but she also found that the propensity to vote for or against conscription depended on:

the nature of the primary production being conducted, with farmers engaged in vine growing, dairying, sheep and, to a lesser-extent, hay production being more likely to resist conscription than those growing wheat.⁵¹

She observed that it was for other researchers to establish the extent to which factors influencing the farming vote in South Australia applied to other states. So far such detailed statistical analysis at subdivisional level has not been carried out across the Commonwealth.

‘The Roman Catholic Menace’

Whatever the reality, as revealed by this historical research, it was the perceived role of the Irish Catholic vote in the conscription referenda which was important. As Labor historian Denis Murphy wrote in 1974:

Clearly there was no simple correlation between Catholicism, Protestantism and conscription, though it would be foolish not to accept that the Easter rebellion had some effect on how a large number of Catholics voted. What was important for Australian politics was that conscriptionists accepted that there was a link between Irish Catholicism and the defeat of conscription.⁵²

This perception was to become the occasion of some of the most vitriolic attacks ever made on the Irish Catholic community in Australia. Irish-Catholic assertiveness in public affairs was to provoke a Protestant backlash—the fury of which was magnified by the humiliation Hughes and his pro-conscription supporters had suffered as a result of the rejection of the government’s proposals. Charges of disloyalty and plotting to overthrow the Empire added a more sinister dimension to the customary sectarian taunts.

Soon after the first referendum, the *Methodist* newspaper, in an article headed ‘The Roman Catholic Menace’ warned its readers of ‘the personal predominance of Roman Catholics in the trades unions and the political labor leagues’ and added:

Roman Catholicism is subtly working ... to secure ascendancy and control. That church is working in the interests of disloyalty and of sectarian advantage, and is throwing dust in the eyes of Protestant electors all the time, especially of the working classes.⁵³

Epithets such as ‘Shirkers’, ‘Sinn Feiners’, ‘IWWers’ and ‘pro-German’ became commonplace.

On 12 March 1917 Billy Hughes complained to Lloyd George through his London confidant Keith Murdoch:

Australian recruiting is practically at a standstill. Irish National Executive here has carried resolution to effect that until Home Rule granted no Irish Catholics shall join forces. This is being acted on and

in such a way that the non-Irish population are going out of Australia to fight The Irish remain behind and in any election their voting strength is greatly increased.⁵⁴

This was nonsense. Recruiting was not at a stand-still in March 1917, averaging just over 6000 per month in the last three months of 1916 and over 4800 per month in the first three months of 1917, with the decline occurring across the whole population and not just among Irish Catholics. Throughout the war Catholics served in the AIF roughly in proportion to their numbers in the population, a fact which was known at the time and which has been confirmed since.⁵⁵

Allegations began to circulate in otherwise responsible circles of an association between the Catholic Church and the IWW. Rev. W F Wentworth Shields, the Anglican Bishop-elect of Armidale, accused the Catholic body of being 'drawn together into an evil partnership with the IWW'.⁵⁶

The growing anti-Catholic animus was stirred up even more in January 1917, after Archbishop Mannix described the war as 'an ordinary trade war', reported in some newspapers as 'a sordid trade war'.⁵⁷ This and other public utterances by Mannix, critical of the government's war policy, elevated him to national status and earned him the role of bogey man in the minds of the government's supporters and a hero to its opponents.

In May 1917 Mannix succeeded Archbishop Thomas Carr as the Archbishop of Melbourne, raising his profile even more. He soon assumed the mantle of leader of the opposition to Hughes' 'win-the-war' party, answering calls for a greater war effort in support of the Empire by pointing to Britain's betrayal of Ireland and arguing that the duty of Australians was to Australia first. He soon became the accepted spokesman of the Irish Catholic community in Australia, while at the same time he became a lightning-rod attracting much of the rising anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bigotry.⁵⁸

Many of Australia's Irish Catholics, particularly those who had climbed the social ladder, were embarrassed by Mannix's outspokenness. Their embarrassment deepened when the archbishop exhorted Australian Catholics to adopt 'the Sinn Fein spirit'. At a rally in support of Irish independence held at Richmond racecourse on 6 November 1917 attended by over 100,000 people, Archbishop Mannix said:

You in Australia are Sinn Feiners, and more luck to you. To you Australia is first and the Empire second.⁵⁹

At one level it could be said that this meant no more than 'self reliance' expressed at the ballot box, however, to many Protestant Australians,

particularly those already fearful of Roman domination, an evocation of ‘the Sinn Fein spirit’ was a call to violence and revolution, a call to emulate those who were opposed to Britain and the Empire.

One of the well-to-do Catholics embarrassed by Mannix’s utterances was Dr Herbert Moran, who wrote in his memoirs:

We Catholics became like a substance held in suspension but never quite in solution. ... Under the commotion of the Great War, in the first year of danger from without, our whole population assumed for a while the appearance of a clear and elegant mixture. It was an Archbishop’s mischief which threw us down again, as a cloudy precipitate.⁶⁰

But Mannix was not the only Irish Catholic to challenge the prime minister and his ‘win-the-war’ party. Queensland premier Thomas Joseph Ryan, the Catholic son of an illiterate Irish farm labourer and an Irish mother, emerged after the 1916 vote as another leader of anti-government opinion.⁶¹ It was in his state that Hughes suffered the indignity of being struck by an egg thrown by an Irish Australian, Bart Brosnan.

The incident occurred at Warwick on 29 November 1917, three weeks before the second conscription referendum. To make matters worse, an Irish Australian policeman, Sergeant Henry Kenny, refused to arrest the egg-thrower, according to Hughes’ account of the incident. As a result Hughes drew up a regulation to establish a Commonwealth police force. In a telegram to the Governor-General, he explained:

This will apply to Queensland where present position is one of latent rebellion. Police is honeycombed with Sinn Feiners and I.W.W. ... [T]here are towns in North Queensland where the Law ... is openly ignored and I.W.W. and Sinn Féin run the show.⁶²

Hughes’ difficulty with Irish Australia seems to have struck a chord with Lloyd George, who on 1 January 1917 told the War Cabinet that Hughes would not be able to attend the proposed Imperial War Conference in London ‘as the lack of settlement in Ireland was causing trouble in Australia’.⁶³ On 25 April 1917 he told Frances Stevenson, his personal secretary and mistress:

At every stage...the Irish question is a stumbling-block in the conduct of the war. It ought to have been settled last year. ... It has done much harm in Australia. Hughes begged me last year to settle it for the sake of Australia, but I failed to do so. Twice since then he has sent me messages saying that it is essential that the matter be settled.⁶⁴

In his criticism of the Irish, Hughes demonstrated a fundamental lack of

appreciation of the attitude of Irish Australians to the Irish question. While radical organisations such as the Irish National Association shared Sinn Féin's desire for an independent Irish republic, they represented a minority of Irish Australian opinion, which overwhelmingly supported home rule. Despite this, Hughes was prepared to brand Australian home-rulers as Sinn Féiners, even though he himself favoured home rule and the Australian parliament passed resolutions supporting it in March 1917.⁶⁵

Although Hughes made representations to the British government to end martial law in Ireland and to implement home rule, 'the image which Hughes projected publicly was of the abrasive anti-Sinn Féiner, constantly harassed by his disloyal Irish republicans, intent ... on "control of the Commonwealth government"'⁶⁶ This was an image Hughes was happy to promote, given the fact that more than 75 per cent of the electorate was Protestant and ill-disposed toward Sinn Féin's agitation for Irish independence at a time when Britain and the Empire were fighting for their survival.

Conclusion

Accepting that a majority of Australia's Irish Catholics voted against conscription, their numbers were too small to kill conscription as Hughes claimed. To single out Irish Catholics is to deny the significant role played by the largely Protestant working-class movement in mobilising the anti-conscription vote. Catholic anti-conscriptionists did play a significant part in the campaign, but their contribution to the outcome—particularly that of Archbishop Mannix—has been exaggerated, both by commentators at the time and by many historians thereafter.⁶⁷

For some Catholics of Irish descent Britain's treatment of Ireland may have been a reason to vote against conscription, but, if so, it was but one among many reasons to vote that way and in all likelihood a product of the same factors which led them to oppose conscription in the first place.

The myth of a monolithic Catholic community led by Archbishop Mannix being the cause of the defeat of conscription gained currency, because it suited both sides. It enabled Hughes and anti-Catholic bigots to blame the 'disloyal' Irish Catholics for their failure to persuade a majority of their compatriots to vote in favour of conscription. And it suited Catholic activists, anxious to unify Catholic support behind efforts to advance Catholic interests, such as state aid for Catholic schools, to be able claim there was solidarity among Catholics which translated into a 'Catholic vote'.⁶⁸

But, contrary to the claims of sectarian warriors, opposition to

conscription did not necessarily equate with opposition to the war or the British Empire. The Irish Catholic community in Australia, on the whole, supported the war effort, enlisting in proportion to their numbers in the population. Even though their rate of enlistment declined in 1917 and 1918, it did so in line with that of the general population; not because of events in Ireland but rather because of declining enthusiasm for a war that had gone on too long and had claimed too many Australian lives.

Notes

- 1 In 1916 the 'No' majority was 72 476 out of a total of 2 247 590 formal votes. Three states recorded 'Yes' majorities (Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania) and three 'No' (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia). In 1917 the 'No' majority was 166 588 out of a total of 2 196 906 votes cast. This time Victoria joined the 'No' majority while Tasmania's 'Yes' majority was only 379 out of a total of 77 383 votes cast (Ernest Scott, *Australia during the war*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, vol. XI of *The official history of Australia in the war of 1914–18*, 1936, p. 352, 427).
- 2 Letter 6 November 1916 to Andrew Bonar Law quoted in LF Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914-1952*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 215.
- 3 Letter quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 276.
- 4 *Catholic Press* 2 November 1916, p. 26.
- 5 Letter (undated) to Harry [Maddison?] quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 217.
- 6 Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, pp. 171–172; Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamic's of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900-1921*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, pp. 98–104.
- 7 HV Evatt, 'Australia on the home front 1914–1918', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 9, 1937, pp. 69–75 at 69–70.
- 8 See, for example, statements of Sir William Irvine, Senator Edward Millen and Tasmanian premier JH Lee (*Argus* 31 August 1916, p. 6).
- 9 A search of Trove on 19 July 2016 using the search phrase 'conscription AND plebiscite' yielded 115 hits: 44 from the decade 1910-1919; 7 from 1930-1939; and 64 from 1940-1949. Of the 44 from 1910-1919, 17 were from 1916, 26 from 1917 and 1 from 1918. This is to be contrasted with the results of a search using the phrase 'conscription AND referendum', which yields 11,155 hits: 10,137 from 1910-1919 of which 3652 were for 1916, 4671 for 1917, 1437 for 1918 and 371 for 1919.
- 10 Ernest Scott, *Australia during the War*, p. 361 states that Hughes could count on 11 supporters among the 31 Labor senators and the 5 Liberal senators giving him a total of 16 out of 36 votes in the Senate.
- 11 From a cable sent in April 1917, quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 286.
- 12 Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 276.
- 13 See Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary industrial unionism: the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 192–202; Frank Cain, *The Wobblies at war: a history of the IWW and the Great War in*

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- Australia, Spectrum, Melbourne, 1993; Ian Turner, *Sydney's burning*, Alpha Books, Sydney, 1969.
- 14 *Southern Cross* 13 October 1916, p. 10.
 - 15 PS Cleary, *Australia's Debt to Irish Nation-Builders*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1933, p. 250.
 - 16 L L Robson, *The First AIF: A Study of its Recruitment 1914-1918*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, pp. 91-93.
 - 17 Cable 14 October 1916, Hughes to Birdwood, quoted from *Smith's Weekly* 24 October 1936 in HV Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader: the Story of WA Holman and the Labour Movement*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 2nd edn, 1942, p. 415.
 - 18 Critchley Parker, *The Slippery Way, Patriotic Pamphlet No. 16*, Melbourne 1916, p. 14, quoted by Alan D Gilbert, 'The Conscription Referenda, 1916-1917: The Impact of the Irish Crisis', *Historical Studies*, Volume 14, 1969, pp. 54-72 at p. 54.
 - 19 *Watchman* 26 October 1916, p. 5. The *Watchman* was an outspoken Protestant weekly published in Sydney that circulated nationally.
 - 20 *Australian Christian Commonwealth* 3 Nov 1916, p. 3.
 - 21 *Leader* 16 December 1916, p. 29. The *Leader* was a weekly newspaper published by Melbourne's daily broadsheet the *Age*.
 - 22 *Watchman* 6 February 1913, pp. 1-2. Henley's 'seed-plots of disloyalty' was an allusion to the Catholic criticism of state-run schools as 'seed-plots of future immorality, infidelity, and lawlessness' contained in a Joint Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic bishops in 1879.
 - 23 For a discussion of the meaning of 'sectarianism' in the Australian context see Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910-1925*, Citadel Books, Sydney, 2002; Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, pp. 4-8; Mark Lyons, 'Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales circa 1865 to 1880', Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1972, pp. viii-xxi.
 - 24 *Freeman's Journal* 6 August 1914, page 22.
 - 25 John A Moses, 'Australian Anglican leaders and the Great War, 1914-1918: the "Prussian Menace", conscription and national solidarity', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 25 no. 3, October 2001, pp 306-323, 309; see also Robert D Linder, *The long tragedy: Australian evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 2000.
 - 26 Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 116-118. See also Michael McKernan, *The Australian churches at war: attitudes and activities of the major churches 1914-1918*, Catholic Theological Faculty, Manly, 1980, p. 30; Michael McKernan, *The Australian people and the Great War*, Nelson, Sydney, 1984, p. 19; Michael McKernan, 'Catholics, conscription and Archbishop Mannix', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, 1976, pp. 299-314. Although Japan was on the Allied side in the war, fear of Japan had been an important element in the evolution of defence policy in Australia since Japan's victory over China in 1895 (Henry P Frei, *Japan's southward advance and Australia from the sixteenth century to World War II*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p. 2). It was believed that Britain's defeat in the war would leave Australia exposed to the perceived imperial ambitions of Germany and Japan in the south-west Pacific.

- 27 *Freeman's Journal*, 13 August 1914, page 21.
- 28 The absence of public attacks on the Irish Catholic community in the first 20 months of the war may also have had something to do with the government's instructions to the censor on ways of 'minimizing harmful agitation and resentment among our people of Irish descent' (Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, pp. 60–61).
- 29 *Advocate* 6 May 1916, p.25; *Freeman's Journal* 4 May 1916, p. 25; *Catholic Press*, 11 May 1916, p. 21; Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 134–136; Peter Overlack, 'Easter 1916' in Dublin and the Australian press: background and response', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 54/55, 1997, pp. 188–193; RP Davis, 'Tasmania and the Irish revolution, 1916–22', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 21 no. 2, 1974, pp. 69–88.
- 30 *Freeman's Journal* 5 October 1916, p. 23; *Catholic Press* 5 October 1916, p. 25
- 31 This was in a cable to the Defence Minister, Senator GF Pearce of Western Australia, which was reported in the newspapers, including those in the eastern states (Bobbie Oliver, *War and peace in Western Australia: the social and political impact of the Great War 1914–1926*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1995, p. 117). The *Sydney Morning Herald* published the text of Archbishop Clune's cable twice (21 October 1916, p. 16; 27 October 1916, p. 6).
- 32 *Advocate* 23 September 1916, p. 25.
- 33 *Advocate* 28 October 1916, p. 23.
- 34 For a description of these divergent views see Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 138–142.
- 35 Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 138–140.
- 36 *Catholic Press* 19 October 1916, p. 20; 26 October 1916, p. 20; *Southern Cross* 13 October 1916, p. 10.
- 37 It was not absolute, however. For example, a group of nine ministers from various Protestant denominations signed a 'Manifesto from Protestant ministers—'Conscription and Christianity'—opposing conscription. A copy is in the Riley Collection in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. For a description of some of the activities of Protestant pacifists and anti-conscriptionists see Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: conscientious objectors to military service in Australia 1911–1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1997, pp. 40–43.
- 38 House of Lords Record Office, Bonar Law Papers BL/53/4/15, quoted in Jill Kitson, *Patriots Three: Billy Hughes, Lloyd George and Keith Murdoch during World War I*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, p. 75.
- 39 *Catholic Press* 2 November 1916, p. 26.
- 40 *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 April 1966, p. 11. Inglis was less dogmatic as to the influence of the Easter rising in 'Conscription in Peace and War, 1911-1945', *Journal of History Teachers' Association of NSW*, October 1967, pp. 5-41 at 21.
- 41 Peter Bastian, 'The 1916 conscription referendum in New South Wales,' *Teaching History*, vol. 5, 1971, pp. 25–36 and J Alcock, 'Reasons for the rejection of conscription—1916–1917,' *Agora*, vol. 7 (1973), pp. 185–194 survey some of the literature on the issue while Turner, *Industrial labour and politics*, pp. 113–116 canvasses a number of the hypotheses, concluding that it was the farmers, normally non-Labor, who were the decisive factor in the referendum's defeat. In 1976 Michael McKernan wrote, 'The Catholic response [to conscription] was a class response much

- more than a religious or national one' ('Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix', *Historical Studies*, Vol 17, 1976, pp. 299-314 at p. 300).
- 42 Ian Turner, 'Industrial Labor and Politics: The Dynamic's of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900-1921', *ANU*, 1962, p. 202, published by ANU in 1965 and Hale & Iremonger in 1979.
- 43 Gilbert, 'Conscription Referenda', p. 54. On the proposal to conscript teaching brothers see Jeff Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 26, number 3, October 2002, pp. 298-313.
- 44 Gilbert, 'Conscription Referenda', p. 71.
- 45 Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1993, pp. 270-273.
- 46 Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia: a social history*, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, 1992, vol. 1, p. 305.
- 47 M Lyons, 'Catholics and Conscription: A Study of Attitudes, N.S.W. 1916-1917', University of New South Wales, Arts IV Thesis, 1966, p. 14.
- 48 V I Murray, 'Archbishops, Editors and Conscription: A Study of the Catholic Church in Victoria and New South Wales, 1916-1917', Monash University, BA (Hons) Thesis, 1977.
- 49 T A Metherall, 'The Conscription Referenda, October 1916 and December 1917: An Inward-Turned Nation at War', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, p. 277.
- 50 Withers, 'The 1916-1917 Conscription Referenda: A Cliometric Re-appraisal', *Historical Studies*, Vol 20, 1982, pp. 36-46 at p. 43. Murray Goot, an academic analyst of public opinion, has recently argued that Withers' modelling is invalid as it suffers from 'ecological fallacy', using 'data about *groups* as if they were data about *individuals*'. He says this is a common problem with most explanations of the referendum results and suggests that the 'close study of voting returns within subdivisions combined with other evidence of a quantitative or qualitative kind' should be pursued in the future (Murray Goot, 'The results of the 1916 and 1917 conscription referendums re-examined' in Robin Archer et al, *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War*, Monash University Press, Clayton, 2016, pp. 123-125, 145).
- 51 Jenny Tilby Stock, 'Farmers and the rural vote in South Australia in World War I: The 1916 conscription referendum', *Historical Studies*, Vol 21 No 84, 1985, pp. 391-411.
- 52 D J Murphy, 'Religion, Race and Conscription in World War I', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 30, 1974, pp. 155-163 at p. 161. [Emphasis added]
- 53 *The Methodist*, 25 November 1916, p. 25.
- 54 Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 261.
- 55 L L Robson 'The origin and character of the First AIF, 1914-18: some statistical evidence', *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 61, 1973, pp. 737-48 at pp. 740-41, 748. See also Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, ch. 3. In June 1917, the Defence Department released figures which showed that 18.57 per cent of those embarking for overseas service were Roman Catholics. According to the 1911 Census 20.14 per cent of the male population had given Roman Catholic as their religion (*Catholic Press* 28 June 1917, p. 26-27; cf. *Argus* 23 June 1917, p. 18).
- 56 *Catholic Press* 23 November 1916, p. 19.

- 57 Reports of Mannix's speech appearing the next day in the *Age*, and during the week in the *Advocate* and the *Tribune* used the word 'ordinary'. However, in an early edition of the *Argus* the expression 'a sordid trade war' appeared. In later editions, however, the word 'sordid' is illegible as if the printing plate has been mutilated. In the 3 February 1917 edition of the *Australasian*, a weekly newspaper published by the *Argus*, the word 'sordid' has been omitted altogether (Cyril Bryan, *Archbishop Mannix: champion of democracy*, The Advocate Press, Melbourne, 1918, pp. 72; photographic copies of the articles are reproduced at pp. 232–235; See also James Franklin, G O Nolan and M Gilchrist, *The Real Archbishop Mannix: From the sources*, Connor Court, Ballarat, 2015, pp. 13-14. Even the Governor-General in a despatch to London reported that Mannix had said 'sordid trade war' (Robson, *The First AIF*, p. 148).
- 58 Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 286.
- 59 *Freeman's Journal*, 8 November 1917, page 27; Franklin, Nolan and Gilchrist, *The Real Archbishop Mannix*, pp. 28-33.
- 60 Herbert Moran, *Viewless Winds: Being the Recollections and Digressions of Australian Surgeon*, Peter Davies, London, 1939, p. 22.
- 61 D J Murphy, *T J Ryan: a political biography*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975, p. 11.
- 62 Fitzhardinge, pp. 291–295. It was quite a mêlée and, as might be expected, accounts are confused. Even Fitzhardinge seems to be unclear as to whether Brosnan was arrested or not and whether it was Bart or his brother Pat who threw the egg that hit Hughes.
- 63 Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 252.
- 64 Quoted in *Patriots Three*, p. 82, cited as HLRO [House of Lords Record Office] Lloyd George Papers FLS/4/4.
- 65 John O'Brien, 'The Irish revolutionary movement and WM Hughes, 1916-1922' in Anne E O'Brien (ed.), *Studies in Irish, British and Australian Relations, 1916-1963: Trade, Diplomacy and Politics*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2005, pp. 27-39 at p. 31.
- 66 O'Brien, 'The Irish revolutionary movement', p. 33.
- 67 This paper focuses on the 1916 referendum. In 1917 an issue emerged which affected Catholics as Catholics, namely, the failure of the government to exempt teaching brothers and seminarians from being conscripted. That issue might have persuaded some Catholics, including Archbishop Michael Kelly, to switch from Yes to No as discussed in Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War'.
- 68 Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 179-180.