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Australian Catholics and Conscription in the Great War

During the Great War the Australian people twice voted to reject conscription for overseas military service. In the historiography of those plebiscites it is generally accepted that most Catholics opposed compulsion because of their Irish and working class backgrounds rather than their religion. However, in December 1917, members of the Catholic hierarchy and official church institutions, who had been silent during the first plebiscite in October 1916, actively campaigned against conscription because the government's proposal did not exempt teaching brothers and seminarians. Although their opposition had nothing to do with theology, its source was religion rather than ethnicity, class, or national sentiment. This article examines the bishops' concern, challenging the notion that they used it as a convenient excuse to abandon their neutrality in order to be re-united politically with their people, and argues that they did so out of a legitimate concern for the welfare of their church.

Introduction

In October 1916 and again in December 1917, Australians voted to reject conscription for overseas military service in the Great War. The reasons for their doing so are complex and have been the subject of much academic debate.¹ Nevertheless, both contemporaries and historians accept there was widespread opposition to conscription among Catholics, though they generally conclude that Catholic opposition was attributable not so much to religious adherence as to their predominantly working class background or to events in Ireland. Although those factors may explain the opposition of Catholics in 1916, when the Church's official position was that it was a political issue for individuals to decide, by December 1917, the prospect that seminarians and

1. Peter Bastian, "The 1916 Conscription Referendum in New South Wales," *Teaching History* 5 (1971): 25–36 and J. Alcock, "Reasons for the Rejection of Conscription — 1916–17," *Agora* 7 (1973): 185–194 survey some of the literature on the issue while Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900–21* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979), 113–116 canvasses a number of the hypotheses. Also, Glenn Withers, "The 1916–17 Conscription Referenda: A Cliometric Re-appraisal," *Historical Studies* 20 (1982): 36–46 provides a statistical analysis of the voting figures in order to test some of the theories.

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teaching brothers might be conscripted induced bishops who had been silent in 1916 to enter the debate to oppose conscription. In his social histories of the Great War, Michael McKernan attributes the bishops' altered stance to a desire not to offend their Catholic people again and to be re-united politically with them.² That assessment, however, gives insufficient weight to the context in which issues affecting the Church emerged during the 1917 campaign, providing not so much a "convenient excuse" to swap sides, but justifiable grounds for the bishops and official bodies, such as the Catholic Federation, to urge Catholics as Catholics to vote against the government's conscription proposals.³

The First Conscription Plebiscite and its Aftermath

When Prime Minister W. M. Hughes returned from London in late July 1916, he was determined to introduce conscription for overseas service, but legislation was out of the question because of opposition from members of his own party in the Senate, and a regulation could not override the *Defence Act*, which excluded conscription for overseas service. Accordingly, he decided to go over the head of his party and seek endorsement from the people in order to put moral pressure on Labor senators to allow a conscription bill to pass.⁴

By the time the plebiscite was held on 28 October 1916, the nation was deeply divided, with the Labor Party on the verge of splitting federally and in a number of States, but Hughes was confident of victory. He had the active support of almost all the metropolitan dailies, of all State governments except Queensland, and of the Protestant churches. However, by a narrow margin, the voters rejected conscription.⁵

The Protestant churches were united in preaching that Christians had a moral duty to vote Yes. Michael McKernan has written: "This attitude depended upon, and was the culmination of, the Protestant argument that the war had religious significance, that it was a moral crusade from which no

2. Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914–18* (Sydney: Canberra: Catholic Theological Faculty, Australian War Memorial, 1980), 123; *The Australian People and the Great War* (West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1980), 38; "Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix," *Historical Studies* 17 (1976), 304. See also Virginia Murray, "Archbishops, Editors and Conscription: A Study of the Catholic Church in Victoria and New South Wales, 1916–17" (BA Honours thesis, Monash University, 1977).

3. The Catholic Federation was a mass organisation of Catholic laity. In the 1910s and 1920s federations existed independently in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania. See Jeff Kildea, "Troubled Times: A History of the Catholic Federation of NSW 1910–24" (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2000); Cecily Close, "The Organization of the Catholic Laity in Victoria 1911–30" (MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1973); Vincent Thomas, "The Role of the Laity in Catholic Education in South Australia from 1836 to 1986" (PhD thesis, Flinders University, 1989); Richard P. Davis, *State Aid and Tasmanian Politics, 1868–1920* (Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1969); and Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910–1925* (Sydney: Citadel Books, 2002).

4. H. V. Evatt, "Australia on the Home Front 1914–18," *Australian Quarterly* 9 (1937): 69–70.

5. The No majority was only 72 476 out of a total of 2 247 5 90 formal votes. Three states recorded Yes majorities (Victoria, Western Australia, and Tasmania) and three No (New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia) (Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War, The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, Vol. 11 [Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936], 352).

citizen might excuse himself."⁶ The Catholic Church, however, saw the issue as political, so that its official stance was one of neutrality, while the personal opinions of its leaders were divided. Archbishops Kelly of Sydney, Clune of Perth and Delaney of Hobart supported conscription⁷ but only Clune's views were expressed publicly during the campaign.⁸ Archbishop Spence of Adelaide was opposed but did not speak publicly⁹ while the views of Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane are not definitely known.¹⁰ Archbishop Carr of Melbourne also maintained a dignified silence¹¹ while his coadjutor, Daniel Mannix, opposed conscription publicly.¹²

6. Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, 37. See, for example, resolutions in support of conscription passed at the Anglican General Synod, which met during October 1916 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 1916, 9; 17 October 1916, 6). Alan Gilbert attributes this attitude of Protestants to "the depth of their commitment to the British Empire" (Alan D. Gilbert, "Protestants, Catholics and Loyalty: An Aspect of the Conscription Controversies, 1917–17," *Politics* 6 (1971): 24).

7. All three were members of the Universal Service League formed in September 1915 to promote compulsory service (Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The Initiation of Australia* [Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1992], 246). On the formation of the Universal Service League, see D. Coward, "The Impact of War on New South Wales: Some Aspects of Social and Political History, 1914–17" (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1974), 203–265. R. P. Davis, in "Tasmania and the Irish Revolution, 1916–22," *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings* 21 (1974): 71, has written "Archbishop Delaney favoured conscription but was not active in the cause." See also Davis, *State Aid and Tasmanian Politics*, 83.

8. He was overseas acting as Chaplain-General to the AIF when the vote was taken. In a cable to the Defence Minister, Clune wrote, "whoever believes in the righteousness and justice of the war we are engaged in ought not to hesitate to vote for compulsory service in Australia." (Bobbie Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914–26* [Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1995], 117.) These remarks were widely reported. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in fact published the text of Archbishop Clune's cable twice (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1916, 16; 27 October 1916, 6).

9. P. M. Gibson, "The Conscription Issue in South Australia, 1916–17," *University Studies in History* 4 (1963–64): 47–80, has written that in January 1916 Spence said that "he was not in favour of conscription except as a last resort. Certainly he was opposed to it for Australia."

10. Duhig was coadjutor to the ailing Robert Dunne who died on 13 January 1917. Arnold Hunt and Robert P. Thomas have written that he "declined vice-presidency of the Brisbane Universal Service League as it was 'inconsistent with his views on the conscription issue.'" (Arnold D. Hunt and Robert P. Thomas, "Catholics and Conscription" in *For God, King and Country: A Study of the Attitudes of the Methodist and Catholic Press in South Australia to the Great War 1914–18*, ed. Arnold D. Hunt and Robert P. Thomas [Salisbury: Salisbury College of Advanced Education, 1979], 18). Patrick O'Farrell in *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia: an Australian History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1992), 325, suggested that Duhig was privately opposed to conscription. But D. J. Murphy claimed that Duhig supported conscription but was forced into a neutral position by ultra-Protestant claims of Catholic disloyalty in Queensland (D. J. Murphy, "Religion, Race and Conscription in World War I," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 30 [1974]: 158). Duhig's biographer has written that Duhig was neither for nor against conscription (T. P. Boland, *James Duhig* [St Lucia: University of Queensland, 1986], 136).

11. Father James Murtagh quotes a statement by Carr on 10 October 1916 that "conscription was a purely state matter; the Church neither advocates nor opposes it; she leaves it to her members to freely decide how they should vote" (James G. Murtagh, *Australia: The Catholic Chapter* [Melbourne: The Polding Press, 1969], 158). T. P. Boland in his biography of Archbishop Carr discusses the conscription issue and refers to a similar statement, but does not indicate Carr's private view on the issue (T. P. Boland, *Thomas Carr: Archbishop of Melbourne* [St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997], 414–417).

12. The first occasion was on 16 September 1916 at the opening of a bazaar at Clifton Hill to raise funds for the local parish (*Catholic Press* [hereafter cited as CP], 21 September 1916, 25). The second was in a reply to an address which the Catholic people of Preston presented to him on 22 October 1916 (CP, 26 October 1916, 27). Ina Bertrand in "The Victorian Country Vote in the Conscription Referendums of 1916 and 1917: The Case of the Wannon Electorate," *Labour History* 26 (1974), 27–28 makes the point that during the 1916 campaign Mannix's views were not well known outside of Melbourne.

Catholic newspapers were also divided. In Sydney, the *Catholic Press* was opposed to conscription, while the *Freeman's Journal* was generally supportive.¹³ In Melbourne, the *Tribune* was strongly opposed, while the *Advocate* was neutral, though its editor, T. C. Brennan, was supportive.¹⁴ In Adelaide the *Southern Cross* was opposed,¹⁵ as was the *West Australian Record* in Perth.¹⁶ The two Brisbane papers generally followed a neutral line, though the *Age* adopted an anticonscription tone in its polling day issue.¹⁷

In response to Protestant allegations of Catholic disloyalty, the Apostolic Delegate, at the request of Archbishop Duhig, issued a letter on 2 October 1916 clarifying the Catholic Church's position on the war and on conscription. In the letter Archbishop Cerretti stated: "The members of the Catholic Church are free citizens, and as such should record their votes in accordance with the dictates of conscience. It would be altogether unreasonable to involve the Church, as a Church, in an issue which its members, as citizens in common with others, are called on to decide. . . . It is . . . because the question of conscription does not affect the Church as a Church, that I am sure addresses on the subject will not be delivered from the pulpits of our Catholic churches."¹⁸

The subtlety of the Catholic position, however, was rejected or misunderstood by many pro-conscription Protestants. To them the Catholic Church's official silence was a clear breach of its moral and patriotic duty, and the fact that some Catholic clergy and newspapers made anticonscription statements demonstrated that the Catholic Church was not only derelict in its duty, it was, in truth, positively disloyal.

In New South Wales, sectarianism was largely absent from the campaign, but not so in Queensland and Victoria.¹⁹ The *Catholic Press* reported that in Victoria "one Critchley Parker delivered himself of some foolish and quite ineffective tracts against Catholic and Irish voters."²⁰ In fact, this was the beginning of a bitter tractarian campaign against Catholics that Critchley Parker and others were to undertake over the next few years.²¹ The perceived role of the Irish Catholic vote in defeating conscription was to become the

13. As polling day drew nearer, however, its attitude softened and in its final editorials it did not advocate a vote one way or the other. The change in attitude of the *Freeman's Journal* (hereafter cited as *FJ*) is discussed in Alan D. Gilbert, "The Conscription Referenda, 1916–17: The Impact of the Irish Crisis," *Historical Studies* 14 (1969), 69–70, who argues that the change resulted from pressure from the Hibernian Society, which was a substantial shareholder; Michael McKernan, "Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix," 299–314, attributes the change to the ruling of the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Cerretti discussed below. Mark Lyons argues that it was the pressure of opinion that forced the paper back into alignment with the majority of Catholics (M. Lyons, "Catholics and Conscription: A Study of Attitudes, NSW 1916–17" [Honours thesis, School of History, University of New South Wales, 1966], 71).

14. Boland, *Thomas Carr*, 415.

15. Hunt and Thomas provide a short survey of that paper's reporting of the two campaigns. See also Gibson, "The Conscription Issue."

16. McKernan has written that "in 1915 every major Catholic newspaper, with the exception of *The West Australian Record*, had supported the idea of conscription" (McKernan, "Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix," 303).

17. Boland, *James Duhig*, 137.

18. *CP*, 5 October 1916, 25; *FJ*, 5 October 1916, 23.

19. Murphy, "Religion, Race and Conscription," 156–158.

20. *CP*, 2 November 1916, 26.

21. For a biographical note on Critchley Parker see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1988), 11: 136–137.

occasion of some of the most vitriolic attacks ever made on the Australian Catholic community.

Although Hughes and the other major political leaders dissociated themselves from the worst of the anti-Catholic rhetoric, such as Critchley Parker's pamphlets and cartoons, no action was taken under the *War Precautions Regulations* to stop their dissemination. The Catholic papers joined the bishops in criticising the prime minister for the failure of his government to ban the material. They argued that attacks on Catholics, accusing them of disloyalty and threatening to deprive them of their civil rights, were harmful to recruiting. Therefore, the regulations should be made to apply to the publishers of the offensive material.²² Bishop John Carroll of Lismore denounced "the vile anti-Catholic cartoons with which Australia has been flooded" and alleged that "the Prime Minister was responsible, inasmuch as he had the power to put a stop to the vile insults offered to Catholic citizens."²³ However, the federal government took no action to suppress their publication.

Relations between the Hughes government and the Catholic Church worsened with the government's proposal to increase the income tax of bachelors and widowers who had not enlisted for active service. The so called "Bachelor Tax," designed to impose an additional tax on those who were unwilling to join up, came under severe criticism from Catholic prelates and Catholic newspapers because priests and teaching brothers would not be exempted, despite assurances they believed the government had given. Apart from being a heavy financial hardship for men who dedicated themselves to a life of service to the community without ordinary remuneration, it was regarded by some as being directed at Catholics because their clergy could not marry. Commenting on the government's decision to abandon plans to exempt priests and brothers, the *Freeman's Journal* complained: "[A] cabinet that has extended its friendship to Mr Critchley Parker would be naturally glad to include our Catholic priests in its bachelor tax, and the wonder is that it even temporarily overlooked such an opportunity of satisfying its anti-Catholic rancour."²⁴

A formal protest signed by a number of Catholic bishops was forwarded to the federal Treasurer. In commenting on this protest, the *Freeman's Journal* continued to attribute to the government, and to Hughes in particular, a deliberate attack on the Catholic Church: "[T]here can be no doubt that the trail of the sectarian serpent runs through the whole sorry business . . . Surely, there is a perfection and refinement about this latest phase of anti-Catholic persecution which suggest the hand of Mr William Morris Hughes."²⁵ The *Freeman's Journal* even saw in the retribution meted out to strikers by the New South Wales government following the collapse of the General Strike of 1917 an anti-Catholic bias that could be attributed to Hughes's persuading State authorities that Catholics were at the bottom of all the trouble.²⁶

22. See, for example, *CP*, 19 April 1917, 26–27; *FJ*, 26 April 1917, 22; 10 May 1917, 25.

23. *CP*, 26 April 1917, 27.

24. *FJ*, 27 September 1917, 24.

25. *FJ*, 11 October 1917, 24.

26. *FJ*, 18 October 1917, 24.

The Second Conscription Plebiscite

In November 1917, the federal government decided once again to refer the issue of conscription to a plebiscite, with the result that social friction, which had been steadily increasing over the previous 12 months, became even more severe. When the Universal Service League called on the federal government to dissolve the House of Representatives so that the government could go to the people on the issue of conscription, the *Freeman's Journal* described it as a brazen piece of political impudence, given that the majority had rejected conscription in 1916 and that the coalition parties had won the general election in May on the basis that conscription had been erased from their policy.²⁷ The newspaper was particularly critical of what it perceived to be the exploitation by Hughes of sectarianism and of the tendency of supporters of conscription, including the metropolitan dailies, to label all anticonscriptionists as pro-German, members of the IWW, Sinn Feiners, and the like.²⁸

The *Catholic Press* continued from where it had left off 12 months before with its characteristic style of editorial and headline: The Fight for Freedom: The Plot to Conscript Australia;²⁹ Is Australia to be Strangled? The Conscription Plot;³⁰ The Economic Aspect of Conscription: The Blood Sacrifice;³¹ Hughes as a Mad Mullah: The Fate of Australia;³² To Crush Australia: The Tory Plot.³³

Anti-Catholic sentiment received an impetus when it became known that Pope Benedict XV had issued a peace note that included a call for all nations to abolish compulsory military training.³⁴ For many Protestants, the Pope's peace initiative confirmed their long held conviction that Catholics were disloyal and working against the Empire. The *Methodist* was quite explicit: "Romanism at heart is disloyal and desires the downfall and dismemberment of the Empire as a great Protestant power. . . . [T]he attitude of Romanists, as a whole, and of the great majority of their priests and bishops, is conclusive as to the utterly disloyal spirit of that communion."³⁵

This was but one of many articles appearing regularly in Protestant newspapers at this time accusing the Catholic Church and its members, particularly those of Irish descent, of being in league with the Central Powers to bring about the defeat of the British Empire. Some claimed that the Pope's note had been instigated by Germany and Austria and that the Catholic

27. *FJ*, 8 November 1917, 24.

28. See, for example, *FJ*, 15 November 1917: "Hoodwinking the Public: The Same Old Conscription," 24, and "The Mud-Throwers: What the Conscriptionists should Avoid," 25; "Holman Helps Hughes: Making Conscription a Sectarian Question," *FJ*, 22 November 1917, 24.

29. *CP*, 15 November 1917, 17.

30. *CP*, 15 November 1917, 26.

31. *CP*, 15 November 1917, 27.

32. *CP*, 6 December 1917, 26.

33. *CP*, 6 December 1917, 26.

34. Extracts from the Pope's peace proposal are quoted in Max Charlesworth, "Australian Catholics and Conscription," in *Conscription in Australia*, ed. Roy Forward and Bob Reece (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1968), 244.

35. *Methodist*, 8 December 1917, 7. Two weeks earlier it declared: "The great fact . . . for the readers to remember at this stage is this: That Romanism is anti-British and disloyal, and that the Vatican is in league with Germany" (*Methodist*, 24 November 1917, 9).

Church was not in favour of seeing Austria defeated as it was the "last hope for the restoration of the Pope's temporal power."³⁶

Archbishop Mannix was the most outspoken Catholic prelate on the conscription issue and his utterances appealed particularly to working class Irish-Australian Catholics. His biting sarcasm, often aimed at the prime minister, and his populism made him a rallying point for anti-Hughes sentiment.³⁷ Hughes hit back accusing Mannix of being the self-appointed leader of the opponents of the government's scheme. In a manifesto to Australian soldiers serving abroad, in which Hughes set out the government's arguments in favour of conscription, the prime minister devoted more than half the space to attacking Mannix, claiming that the archbishop "preached sedition in season and out of season" and warning the soldiers that "[b]ehind Dr Mannix are arrayed the Independent [sic] Workers of the World and the reckless extremists responsible for the recent strike, the pacifists and the pro-Germans."³⁸ As far as the *Catholic Press* was concerned, Hughes was manipulating the sectarian issue for party political purposes and, in reckless disregard of his duty as prime minister to promote national unity, particularly in time of war.³⁹

At the same time as Mannix was occupying the headlines, Archbishop Kelly was quietly, but progressively, abandoning his erstwhile support of conscription. Initially, he did not renounce conscription outright, but promoted volunteerism as the appropriate method of attracting reinforcements. By the time of the plebiscite, however, his conversion was so complete that he publicly admonished Catholics not to support the government's proposal.

The reasons for Kelly's change of attitude were manifold. Partly it was a response to the fact that in his own archdiocese his people did not support his pro-conscriptionist views, a reality brought home to him forcefully both at the St Patrick's Day celebrations earlier that year, when a vocal minority vented their anger at pro-conscriptionist, ex-Labor politicians⁴⁰ and in unsolicited advice from fellow Catholics.⁴¹ Furthermore, Kelly had increasingly found

36. Quoted in Hunt, 20. The *Methodist* alleged that the real author of the peace note was the German emissary and leader of the Catholic Centre Party, Mathias Erzberger (*Methodist*, 1 December 1917, 7).

37. McKernan, "Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix," 308–311.

38. The manifesto, which was not circulated in Australia, was published in Canadian newspapers supporting the pro-conscriptionist Borden government. After the plebiscite was over, the *FJ* republished a version of the manifesto that had appeared in the Montreal *Daily Star*. Hughes did not deny the authenticity of the document but said that the published version was not the exact text (*FJ*, 24 January 1918, 18). The manifesto is also reproduced in Cyril Bryan, *Archbishop Mannix: Champion of Democracy* (Melbourne: The Advocate Press, 1918), 165–166.

39. *CP*, 6 December 1917, 11.

40. Reports of the demonstration are in *CP*, 22 March 1917, 18; *FJ*, 22 March 1917, 20–21; *Sydney Morning Herald* 19 March 1917, 8.

41. Correspondence in Archbishop Kelly Papers in the Sydney Archdiocesan Archives includes: a letter dated 19 March 1917 from Patrick Cunningham (on the letterhead of the Hibernian Australasian Catholic Benefit Society) in relation to the St Patrick's Day demonstration in which he charged, "you will know by the temper of your people that you are totally out of touch with your people" (Item 9.15, File T1420); a letter dated 20 November 1917 from "An Irish Catholic" in which three pages of insults directed at Kelly's association with the rich and the "War Warriors" conclude with a demand that he "give up being a recruiting Sergeant" (Item 9.53, File T1420); a letter dated 6 December 1917 from Henry F. Spencer warning Kelly that Prime Minister Hughes had quoted Kelly's words in an attack on Mannix and requesting Kelly to be more careful (Item 9.60, File T1420).

himself alienated from many of his former conscriptionist allies because of their increasingly anti-Catholic rhetoric, a factor that Kelly believed was hindering voluntary enlistment. In an address at Westmead Boy's Orphanage on 4 November 1917, Kelly touched on the subject: "His Grace then turned to the war, and emphasised the fact that the loyalty of Catholics could not be questioned; and as far as the Empire was concerned he contended that if all were equal there would be more enthusiasm about the war. This particularly applied to men of Irish nationality."⁴² Two weeks later, at the blessing of the Poor Clares chapel at Waverley, he was more specific: "I fear that some influential members of the Governments directing this war have done a great deal to hinder the nation from winning. Why disgust — I will not say offend — why disgust any section of the people who are steadfast to religious principles and to sound principles simply because they are steadfast to these principles?" After describing a Critchley Parker cartoon he continued: "That was circulated last year. Is that helping to win the war? Is not a volunteer worth ten or twenty who are forced? Get the volunteers, I say. Anyone in Australia who does not stand for the interests of Australia and of all Australia is not worthy of the name. Why are efforts being made to alienate one-fourth of the population of Australia by wounding their deepest feelings."⁴³

Although the anticonscriptionist tendency of his people and the anti-Catholic rhetoric of some pro-conscriptionists were matters that may have influenced Kelly's personal attitude to conscription, they were not matters which, in Kelly's ecclesiology, could justify the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney's intervention in the debate. Unlike his Melbourne counterpart, Kelly was careful to avoid stepping over the line that divided affairs of state from affairs of the church. Furthermore, there was no moral issue upon which Kelly, as a leading churchman, could base his participation in the public debate. His support for the war effort and his encouragement of voluntary enlistment throughout the period show that he harboured no doubt as to the justice of the Allied cause, and Catholic teaching on war did not preclude compulsory military service as a means of prosecuting a just war.

What eventually moved Kelly conscientiously to a position of direct and open opposition to conscription was the omission of seminarians and teaching brothers from the categories of persons who were to be exempt from military service under the government's proposed scheme for implementing conscription.⁴⁴ Because this was a matter that directly affected the interests of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Cerretti's dictum of 1916 requiring the Church to remain neutral could be distinguished. Thus, on 16 December 1917, the Sunday before the vote was taken, Archbishop Kelly, at the blessing of additions to St Patrick's church, Kogarah, delivered this message to his coreligionists: "If by any chance the Brothers should be conscripted, it would

42. *FJ*, 8 November 1917, 20.

43. Reports of the ceremony are in *CP*, 22 November 1917, 20 and *FJ*, 22 November 1917, 27.

44. Details of the government's scheme, as announced by Prime Minister Hughes at Bendigo on 12 November 1917, including the list of exemptions, are set out in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 1917, 7–8. See also Scott, *Australia During the War*, 413.

probably mean the closing down of our schools, while the taking away of the students from the seminaries would mean that in three or four years we would not have priests to carry on. . . . Can we consent to that? . . . Therefore we must be careful. No Catholic faithful to the Church would allow a measure to proceed that involves the risk of closing our Catholic schools and disorganise the ecclesiastical seminaries.”⁴⁵

Michael McKernan has argued that Kelly (and other bishops who adopted a similar line) seized on the issue of exemptions “to join the anticonscription bandwagon” because they were desperate “to become reunited politically with their people.”⁴⁶ He further charged: “It may be that Kelly in particular used this as a convenient excuse, because he continued to fulminate against what he termed ‘an outrage upon God’ even after he had received a private message from Hughes that ‘the Government had no intention whatever of including such persons as Christian Brothers and Brothers of similar orders with those liable for service under the scheme.’”⁴⁷

This assessment does not provide a complete or satisfactory explanation of Kelly’s dramatic turnaround. Although it may be true that he was relieved to find himself on the same side as the majority of his fellow Catholics, it was also the case that he was now offside with many of the “leading” Catholics of the archdiocese with whom he frequently mixed. But, more significantly, Kelly’s intervention in 1917 was consistent with the stance he had twice previously taken on the issue of ecclesiastical exemptions from military service.

In 1910 Kelly had strongly and publicly objected to the scheme for compulsory military training for home service contained in amendments to the *Defence Act*, on the ground that the bill did not exempt theological students and clergy. As a result of Kelly’s protest the bill was amended.⁴⁸ In 1916 the government issued call up notices, shortly before the October plebiscite.

45. *FJ*, 20 December 1917, 23. The speech of the archbishop as reported in the *CP* differs in the detail but not in substance or tone (*CP*, 20 December 1917, 25). A measure of how far Kelly had come is that, after this speech, the *Methodist* bracketed Kelly with Mannix: “. . . the disloyal pronouncements of Archbishops Mannix and Kelly and other of the R. C. priesthood [whose purpose is] to prevent reinforcements being sent to the Australian troops at the front.” (*Methodist*, 29 December 1917, 7).

46. McKernan, “Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix,” 304. Virginia Murray reached a similar conclusion after tracing the conflict between Kelly and the *CP* on the one hand and Mannix and the *Advocate* on the other on the conscription issue, arguing that the former in Sydney and the latter in Melbourne came to embrace the anticonscription cause in order to adopt what they perceived to be the majority Catholic viewpoint on the issue (Murray, “Archbishops, Editors and Conscription”).

47. McKernan, “Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix,” 304–305.

48. *FJ*, 22 September 1910, 21; 29 September 1910, 36; 6 October 1910, 27; 13 October 1910, 19; See also John Barrett, *Falling In: Australians and “Boy Conscription” 1911–15* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979), 102. The Defence Minister had rejected an amendment moved by Senator Needham that would have provided an exemption from military training for ministers of religion and final year theological students (*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, Vol. 56 [31 August 1910] 2285–2286). After Kelly’s objections had been brought to the attention of the government, W. M. Hughes moved an amendment in the House of Representatives which the Senate adopted without debate (*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House, Vol. 59 [22 November 1910], 6517–6519; Senate, Vol. 59 [23 November 1910], 6534). The Defence Department’s file relating to Archbishop Kelly’s objection is at MP84/1, 1802/2/51, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

Kelly complained to the Defence Minister that, notwithstanding exemptions from military service in time of war as set out in the *Defence Act*, local officials were requiring all those of military age to present themselves to the authorities and to prove their entitlement to exemption. The archbishop requested the minister to issue an instruction that those entitled to exemption were not to be called up, and he offered to provide the government with a list of the names of priests, religious brothers and seminarians. Kelly's representation in this instance was also successful.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the exemptions issue did not suddenly emerge during the plebiscite campaign. In May 1917 there was increasing speculation that the government would introduce conscription if returned at the elections that month. The bishops discussed among themselves what they might do, in such circumstances, if the government refused to exempt seminarians and teaching brothers from overseas military service. A few days before the elections, Bishop Dunne sent Kelly a letter in which he expressed the view that conscription was unlikely, but if it were introduced he believed the authorities would exempt all clerics in the same way as the government of New Zealand had recently agreed to do.⁵⁰ Dunne's optimism was deflated in August 1917 when the Wellington Military Service Board decreed that seminarians and members of religious orders must, if medically fit, enrol in New Zealand's conscript army. The episode was a salutary warning to the bishops that, unless the promises of political leaders were translated into legislation, they ought not be trusted.⁵¹

It is in this context that Kelly's stance on the issue and his rejection of Hughes' promises must be seen, particularly as the list of exemptions published in November referred to "ministers of religion" but not to seminarians or teaching brothers. Given that the Defence Minister, Senator Pearce, well knew Kelly's views on the issue from his interventions of 1910 and 1916, it was not unreasonable for Kelly and his fellow bishops to conclude that the absence of specific exemptions indicated that the government did intend to conscript brothers and seminarians.

Following publication of the government's proposals, Archbishop Kelly raised the exemptions issue at the blessing of the Poor Clares chapel at Waverley on 18 November 1917 when, after mentioning that twenty-eight seminarians had just been ordained, he asked the audience, "Are these men to be conscripted?" The audience responded "No." Kelly said, "Let that go forth."⁵² At the same function, the president of the Catholic Federation of New South Wales, P. S. Cleary, also spoke on the subject, no doubt with the approval of the archbishop. Cleary argued that the conscription of seminarians and brothers would not yield a single army company, yet it would threaten

49. Letter dated 18 October 1916 from Archbishop Kelly to the Minister for Defence (Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, items 16.1, 16.2, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney).

50. Correspondence in Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, items 16.13, 16.14, 16.15, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney. Dunne also indicated his attitude to conscription when he added, "I hope conscription will be shown to be alien to our Australian Liberties next Saturday."

51. *FJ*, 2 August 1917, 24.

52. *CP*, 22 November 1917, 20; *FJ*, 22 November 1917, 27.

the destruction of the Catholic school system — an outcome that “the enemies in our midst will consider more satisfactory than winning the war.” He concluded his speech with a rallying cry, “Let us then, all Catholics worthy of the name, acting in unison, throw back this insulting conscription of God’s anointed and keep Australia free.”⁵³

Two days later, Kelly, on behalf of the Catholic hierarchy of Australia, wrote to the prime minister advising him that the conscription of brothers and seminarians would upset the supply of teachers and priests and “consequently must excite opposition deep-seated and general on our part.”⁵⁴ The archbishop received messages of support for his action from a number of bishops, but not all were convinced that private representations would provide an adequate guarantee that the government would amend the list of exemptions. On 21 November 1917 Bishop John Carroll of Lismore wrote to Kelly, “I feel doubtful if any reliance can be placed in promises which may now be made. However it is well to get them, and to have them made in a public manner.”⁵⁵

Notwithstanding the stern note of warning in Kelly’s letter and Cleary’s implicit threat of organised action by the Catholic Federation, Hughes’ initial response was made in a manner that did not even satisfy Carroll’s minimum standard. The prime minister wrote to J. D. Fitzgerald MLC, a prominent Catholic and a cofounder of the Universal Service League, advising him of Kelly’s letter and requesting him to inform Kelly “in the strictest confidence” that “the Government had no intention whatever of including such persons as Christian Brothers and Brothers of similar orders with those liable for service under the scheme.”⁵⁶ McKernan suggests that the reason for Hughes’s secrecy was that “in the volatile sectarian situation he did not want to appear to make concessions to Catholics.”⁵⁷ This may well be true, but it is precisely for that reason the bishops were not prepared to trust mere undertakings by the prime minister, let alone his secret assurances. The New Zealand experience and the dishonouring of the government’s promise to exclude the clergy from the Bachelor Tax were still fresh in their minds.

At first, Kelly’s public response to Hughes’s reply was restrained. He told a gathering at the opening of St Joseph’s Convent, Hunters Hill on 25 November 1917:

In this matter of conscription, I hope there will be no attempt to conscript the clergy or Christian Brothers, or Brothers of our schools, and why? There are many reasons; but for me there is one: It would not please God. It would be an outrage upon God. . . . God save Australia from this, and I do trust Australia will be spared; but, however, the referendum goes, I hope it will be recognised that those consecrated to

53. *CP*, 22 November 1917, 20.

54. Kelly to Hughes, letter, 20 November 1917, Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, items 16.5, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney.

55. Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, items 16.6, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney. Carroll also recommended that, in the event of an unsatisfactory reply, “a definite united appeal to our own people against conscription should be made.”

56. Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, item 16.7, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney.

57. McKernan, “Catholics, Conscription and Archbishop Mannix,” 305.

God are not to be brought under compulsion of military service, or those on whom we depend for the civilisation of our children. I hope this matter will be attended to by those concerned. I do not speak in the way of threatening, but in the way of instruction.⁵⁸

Despite Kelly's disavowal of threats, it is clear he was reinforcing the warning contained in his letter that this was an issue of the utmost importance to Catholics. Bishop Patrick Dwyer of Maitland, who, like Carroll, was not convinced of the efficacy of the archbishop's diplomacy, decided to call a protest meeting "which shall be thoroughly representative of all Catholics of the district . . . to give our people an opportunity of expressing their views so that the Government may know them."⁵⁹ The *Catholic Press* weighed in with an editorial entitled "The Church in Peril" in which Tighe Ryan, demonstrating his talent for melodrama, wrote, "We have survived the attacks which Sir Henry Parkes and other enemies of the Catholic fold made upon us in the past; but this conscription scheme is fraught with much greater perils. It would stab the Church in the very heart."⁶⁰

The hierarchy's characterisation of the government's scheme as an attack on the Church afforded P. S. Cleary the necessary justification to mobilise the resources of the Catholic Federation to oppose conscription. Although Cleary, as assistant editor of the *Catholic Press*, was a high profile anticonscriptionist, he had followed the Cerretti line in 1916 and had not involved the Federation in the campaign. But circumstances had changed and the State Council directed that a circular be sent to all branches "pointing out the dangers that our schools are running and urging them to bring the true condition of affairs before the members."⁶¹ The circular requested branches to discuss the failure of the government scheme to exempt seminarians and brothers and either to forward a written protest to their federal representatives or to arrange to interview the representative on behalf of the members and submit a protest personally.⁶² The branches responded to the State Council's call by organising protest meetings in their parishes and by calling on members of parliament, thereby letting the government know that there was widespread Catholic concern over the issue.⁶³

On 28 November 1917, having failed to win Kelly's support by his private assurances, Hughes went public with his proposal, announcing at Toowoomba

58. *CP*, 29 November 1917, 24.

59. Dwyer to the Administrator of the Maitland cathedral, letter, 25 November 1917, reproduced in *CP*, 29 November 1917, 17. Dwyer also indicated that the meeting should express the views of Catholics on the "unfair incidence" of the Bachelor Tax. Dwyer also wrote to Kelly, informing him of his decision to call the meeting (Archbishop Kelly Papers, Box T1523, items 16.10, Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Sydney).

60. *CP*, 29 November 1917, 27. The editor of the *FJ*, in less flamboyant language, also argued that non-exemption threatened the Catholic school system and the future of the Australian priesthood (*FJ*, 29 November 1917, 24–25).

61. *CP*, 6 December 1917, 23.

62. The text of the circular is in *CP*, 13 December 1917, 13.

63. *CP*, 13 December 1917, 13. Although the State Council's circular requested the branches to confine their consideration to the issue of exempting seminarians and brothers, some branches added protests about the treatment that Archbishop Mannix had been receiving. For reports of branch activities in this regard, see *CP*, 27 December 1917, 21; 10 January 1918, 11; 17 January 1918, 11.

that "the Christian Brothers would be regarded as ministers of religion, and be exempt."⁶⁴ However, inexplicably, Hughes did not refer to seminarians, an omission brought to his notice by a leading Catholic, L. F. Heydon, who wrote to the prime minister, "as a fervent supporter of your campaign," advising him that if he were to promise also to exempt seminarians and brothers in training "you would remove the one only conscientious appeal to a Catholic as such to vote against you, and you would release many thousands of conscientious reluctant Noes, and turn them into happy Yeses." Hughes responded by saying that on the previous day at a meeting at Her Majesty's theatre in Sydney he had promised that "all such persons" would be exempt, a promise he restated at Junee on 6 December 1917 when he told his audience that if conscription were carried he would introduce a bill to exempt brothers and clerical students.⁶⁵

The editor of the *Freeman's Journal* was clearly not impressed. He suggested that, in order to convince Catholics that the prime minister's promises would be implemented, the exemptions should be set out on the ballot paper.⁶⁶ The Catholic Federation was not impressed either. Charles Lawlor, the General Secretary, pointed out to members that it was not for the prime minister to say who would be exempt: "No gazette, notice, or regulation has been published exempting the Brothers, and it is considered by the State Council that a mere promise to do something cannot be accepted." He drew attention to the fact that, although the New Zealand government had made similar promises to Archbishop Redwood before conscription was made law there, the legislation had not included a specific exemption and the Courts had rejected claims for exemption by the brothers. Cleary argued along similar lines in an article in the *Catholic Press* entitled "Conscripting the Brothers: Warning: Mr Hughes Has No Power to Exempt." He concluded, "If in doubt, vote 'No,' or Catholics in Australia may be as sorry as their coreligionists in New Zealand."⁶⁷ Tighe Ryan added to the indictment: "Imagine depending on Mr Hughes's promise and on a parliament that rejected a proposal to exempt religious Brothers and the clergy from the operation of the Bachelor Tax."⁶⁸

At the annual Communion Breakfast of the Catholic Federation at Casino on 9 December 1917, Bishop John Carroll echoed the concerns of the Federation's leadership that, if the plebiscite were carried in its present form, seminarians and brothers would be conscripted. He dismissed Hughes's assurances that they would be exempted, saying: "that was only a personal promise and did not carry the official promise of the Government." He warned that if the brothers were conscripted "a fatal blow would be aimed at

64. *CP*, 6 December 1917, 23.

65. The correspondence was published in *CP*, 13 December 1917, 27.

66. *FJ*, 6 December 1917, 26–27.

67. The quotations in this paragraph are from articles by Lawlor and Cleary in *CP*, 6 December 1917, 23. The *FJ* published a letter written by Cleary in his capacity as president of the Catholic Federation setting out similar arguments (*FJ*, 6 December 1917, 27).

68. *CP*, 13 December 1917, 27.

the schools" and if the seminarians were conscripted "in a short time there would be no priests."⁶⁹

On the following day, Bishop Patrick Dwyer presided at a "largely attended and enthusiastic public meeting of the Catholics of Maitland and the diocese" called to express concern at the proposal to conscript seminarians and brothers. The *Catholic Press* reported that the bishop "dealt trenchantly with the danger of ruin to our schools if the Brothers were conscripted" and also criticised the Bachelor Tax, saying that he personally would not pay it. Charles Lawlor moved a motion that the meeting pledge itself to oppose the conscription of seminarians and brothers, and a further motion opposing the imposition of the Bachelor Tax on the clergy was also moved. The article reported that the motions were enthusiastically carried and that "a fund was opened for the purpose of organising to defeat these evils." An amount of £258, a substantial sum, was collected there and then.⁷⁰

On 13 December 1917 the *Catholic Press* published an editorial written by Ryan entitled "Death-Blow to the Church" in which it argued that no graver responsibility rested upon Catholics than with the vote on 20 December because, although Sir Henry Parkes had failed to destroy the priesthood through the self-sacrificing heroism of our people, "Mr Hughes may succeed with conscription."⁷¹

On 20 December, the day of the vote, the *Catholic Press* went all out to influence Catholic voters, publishing verbatim accounts of the speeches of Archbishop Kelly at Kogarah and of Bishops Carroll and Dwyer.⁷² Editorial comments included such statements as: "Those who vote 'Yes' imperil the liberty and lives of all the teaching Brotherhoods and the clerical students" and "If they are conscripted all our boys' schools and all the ecclesiastical colleges in the Commonwealth will be closed."⁷³

Agnes Macready, a regular contributor to the *Catholic Press*, wrote an article especially directed at women entitled "The Brothers and Their Lives: Will You Stab Them," in which she asked her readers, "Is any mother, then, prepared to sign away the life of a teaching Brother to whom she entrusts her son, when he may no longer be kept for his own sake at her knee?"⁷⁴

Hughes had clearly misjudged the significance of the issue for Catholics. By ignoring the warnings of Kelly and Heydon that, if the matter were not satisfactorily resolved, even his Catholic supporters might be "conscientious

69. A short report of the function is in *CP*, 13 December 1917, 25. A full account of the meeting including a verbatim report of the speech of Bishop Carroll is also published in *CP*, 20 December 1917, 18.

70. A report of the meeting is in *CP*, 13 December 1917, 25. A full account of the meeting including a verbatim report of the speeches of the Bishop and of Lawlor was also published in *CP*, 20 December 1917, 15.

71. *CP*, 13 December 1917, 28.

72. *CP*, 20 December 1917, 15 (Dwyer), 18 (Carroll), 25 (Kelly).

73. *CP*, 20 December 1917, 17. The main editorial on page 26 asserted, "Today is the most fateful day in the history of Australia."

74. *CP*, 20 December 1917, 17. Agnes Macready frequently wrote under the pen-name "Arrah Luen." She had been an early contributor to the *CP* after the paper was founded in 1895. She served as nurse during the Boer War, sending reports to the *CP* that were often republished in England and the United States (*CP*, 13 September 1928, 56).

reluctant Noes," Hughes, the prolific regulation maker who was unwilling to make a regulation exempting seminarians and teaching brothers, played into the hands of anticonscriptionist Catholics who, with the backing of the bishops, the voice of the Catholic newspapers, and the organisational support of the Catholic Federation, were able to advocate a No vote among Catholics in cities, suburbs, and villages throughout the land.

When the votes were counted the outcome was an increased majority against conscription.⁷⁵ Cleary's triumphal editorial in the following week's edition of the *Catholic Press* nominated resentment against the introduction of sectarianism and the non-exemption of seminarians and teaching brothers as two factors contributing to the result.⁷⁶

Conclusion

In 1914 many Catholics believed the war would provide an opportunity for them to gain greater communal acceptance. They hoped that by sharing in the blood sacrifice they would be rewarded with increased tolerance and the satisfaction of their grievances. During the first two years of the war this hope looked as if it might be realised. However, the sectarianism that re-emerged in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and during the conscription campaigns destroyed that dream for a generation.⁷⁷ Whereas religion has generally been recognised as a factor in the formation of Protestant views supporting the war and conscription, it is mostly ignored when it comes to explaining Catholic voting patterns. This is partly because historians have considered other factors more likely indicators of the way Catholics voted: their working class background; events in Ireland; and the "Australia first" rhetoric of Archbishop Mannix.⁷⁸

In 1916 the Catholic Church took a neutral stand on the conscription issue and Catholic opinion leaders expressed, or were known to hold, views on both sides of the question. In the main, those views were based on considerations other than religious conviction. However, by December 1917, Catholics were concerned that leading conscriptionists regarded their religion as something to be reviled publicly without penalty, that their priests and teaching brothers were to be taxed by the same politicians who were soliciting their vote, and that the viability of their schools and seminaries was under threat. Members of the Catholic hierarchy and official church institutions, who had been silent during the first plebiscite, actively campaigned against conscription, not in

75. 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. (Scott, *Australia During the War*, 427).

76. *CP*, 27 December 1917, 26.

77. Frank Farrell, "J. H. Scullin, The Irish Question and the Australian Labor Party," in *Australia and Ireland 1788–1988: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Colm Kiernan (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 156, 162; Edmund Campion has succinctly summed up these turbulent times in these words, "The First World War had put Catholic beside Protestant in the trenches, in the munitions factories, in the war graves. But the passion of the conscription referenda had kept them apart." (Edmund Campion, *Australian Catholics* [Ringwood: Viking, 1987], 89–90).

78. See discussion of role of Catholics in Bastian and in Alcock; Also Murray, "Archbishops, Editors and Conscription," 1–7 reviews a number of writings relating to the contribution of Catholics to the conscription issue.

order to be reunited politically with their people, but because they believed the Church itself was in peril. Although their concern had nothing to do with theology, its source was religion rather than ethnicity, class, or national sentiment. The flamboyant and outrageous Archbishop Mannix may have appealed to the working class sentiments of Catholics, to their Irishness, and their Australian nationalism, but it was the troubled entreaties of the pious and restrained Archbishop Kelly that alerted them to the dangers that conscription posed to their church.