

## PLOD ESSAY: 1916 Conscription Referendum



*Leaving for War 1916: Edgar Beard (left front row); Arty Landless (2<sup>nd</sup> third row)*

In 1916, Wonthaggi voted in two referendums, one more important than the other. An advertisement in the *Sentinel* on August 18 describes the first issue thus: “The question as to whether the picture halls of Wonthaggi shall be closed on Sunday is one that merits very careful consideration, owing to far reaching consequences. The proposal to deprive a large portion of the public of Wonthaggi of CLEAN, WHOLESOME, RATIONAL ENJOYMENT AND INSTRUCTION on Sunday nights after church hours should be strongly resented because it is a direct attempt to interfere with the LIBERTY OF THE SUBJECT.”

The ad went on to proclaim that movies on Sundays were particularly important in Wonthaggi because, “In proportion to populations there are more residents living in boarding houses than any other town in the State of like size.”

1204 Wonthaggiens voted, the vote being 678 in favour of pictures, 514 opposed. Thus the Sunday Closing by-law was defeated and Wonthaggi became, to the great satisfaction of sympathisers, the only town in Victoria to allow films on Sunday.

Two months later, Wonthaggiens would take part in a much more important referendum that

would affect all Australians and, as the historian, Manning Clark, described it, “split the country into two opposing camps”.

In 1916, of course, the Great War (World War I) was raging in Europe. By 1915, British casualties in France alone had reached the one-million mark and she looked towards the colonies to find replacements. In October 1915, Billy Hughes became leader of the Labor Party, which was then in power. As Prime Minister of Australia, he was invited to Britain to examine the plight of the Mother Country. There he saw a country at bay and his passions were aroused.

After touring the Western Front, where soldiers hailed him affectionately as ‘the Little Digger’, Hughes returned to the Antipodes in 1916 convinced that Australia must increase its contribution of men, munitions and food to the war effort. He believed the only way Australia could supply the 16,500 men per month that the Imperial General Staff said they required was to introduce conscription.

According to historian, Stuart Macintyre, Hughes’ own party was unlikely to pass necessary legislation because the labour movement in

Australia was increasingly critical of the slaughter in Europe. Hughes was in a quandary. A letter from the Warragul Shire Council addressed to the Phillip Island and Woolamai Shire Council, which was printed in the *Sentinel* 25 August 1916, expressed the opinion that, "It was high time Mr Hughes shook himself up and brought in conscription. It was no use of him howling in London if he is not game to back up his opinion now that he has returned to Australia." This sentiment did not go down well in Wonthaggi, who were strong Labor supporters and many of whom belonged to the principal groups opposing the referendum, "All of whom challenged the assumption of a unified national interest in war and the supposed equality of sacrifice embodied in military conscription."

In the face of this two-sided coin, opposition and support, Hughes went over the heads of his party appealing directly to the citizens with a Conscription Referendum. The country erupted.

*The Sentinel*, the Miners' Paper, began publishing reports about what happens in a country that has conscription. In an article published 8 September, a report from the British Conscription Tribunals, which decided who could and could not be exempted from the Army, was alarming. An appeal from the Printers' Register in England for the exemption of linotype operators resulted in, "the military representative [protesting] against the attitude of the Typographical Association in regard to female labour. A linotype, he understood, was as easy to operate as a typewriter, but the Association would not permit female labour. That was a wrong position which compelled the military representative to claim every linotype operator and replace him with a woman." One can imagine how this went down with the men in Wonthaggi, who were the breadwinners.

In what was supposed to be a humorous article entitled 'Wonthaggi in 1918', a local journalist imagined what it would be like with all the men conscripted and women working in the mine. If they ever went on strike, he mused, the strike meeting would be chaotic with the women absenting themselves to go shopping: "Garn," said a small boy, "you know the women stopped because there was a bargain sale at Rudin's". The article went on to say there was considerable interruption after this remark, "in which a small boy and hatpins played a prominent part". Although it was humorous, the satirical purpose of the article was to scare any red-blooded man into voting against Conscription.

The paper reported meetings and rallies held in the town. No one wanted to shirk their duty to crown and country and at recruitment meetings speakers were applauded. One such said he, "hoped the people of Wonthaggi would do all they could to induce fit men to go to the front voluntarily" and was loudly applauded, but when his appeal seemed to indicate he was talking about conscription, there was much angry shouting.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of October there was a report of an anti-Conscription meeting: "No work was done at the State Coal Mine, members of the local branch of the AC&SE Federation, trade unionists and anti-conscriptionists having decided on a stop-work meeting for the day. Despite the inclemency of the weather there was a large attendance and after several speeches were made a resolution opposed to conscription was carried... In the evening there was a packed meeting at the Wonthaggi theatre."

At the Theatre that night, members of the community stood up to speak for and against Conscription. The union man said that Conscription was, "diametrically opposed to the best interests of the workers." And he moved that the citizens of Wonthaggi are "uncompromisingly opposed to the introduction of conscription in any shape or form." The applause was raucous. When Mr Wishart and Mr Brunt of the Progress Association moved that, "this meeting is in sympathy with the Prime Minister's proposals and will do its utmost to further the cause of conscription and bring the referendum to a successful issue," the shouting caused a great din. Nevertheless, about fifty people were brave enough to support this proposal.

In another meeting held 26 October, two days before the referendum, the following resolution was carried: "That this meeting of citizens of Wonthaggi emphatically protest against the utterances of the ex-Labor Prime Minister, Mr Hughes, in classing all opponents to conscription as pro-German and wasters, and further, we will not agree to the introduction of Prussian militarism into Australia and will vote 'No' on the 28<sup>th</sup>."

In the end the vote for the referendum, according to the article printed in the *Sentinel* on 3 November 1916 five days after the vote, was thus:

In the commonwealth (incomplete):

NO = 993,373

YES = 912,520

In Wonthaggi:

NO = 1486

YES = 1124

Much to Billy Hughes' rage, the Referendum was lost. Hughes had the support of the Protestant Churches, the press, business and professional

leaders, but the Labor Party, the Catholic Church and Unionists all opposed it.

Hughes tried again a year later and the second campaign was even more divisive. As indicated in the last resolution put before the people in Wonthaggi two days before the first vote, Hughes was resorting to underhand tactics, calling those opposed to his referendum traitors, aligning them with Bolshevik revolutionaries, calling them agents of Germany, accusing Unionists of being wreckers, claiming women who refused to give up their sons to war were emasculators... and on and on. This

became a tirade in second referendum, which was lost with an even greater majority.

During the first World War, Australia never allowed conscription, but, as the photograph above shows, patriotic men volunteered at a rate of knots and became soldiers of legend, according to dispatches sent from the front to the *Bulletin* by journalist, C.E.W. Bean.

So, Wonthaggi's vote against the Conscription Referendum reflected that of every state except Victoria.

- C. Landon, November 2010.

**The Referendum.**

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**COMMONWEALTH**  
(Incomplete)

NO	-	-	903,373
YES	-	-	912,520

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**WONTHAGGI**  
(Complete)

NO	-	-	1486
YES	-	-	1124

[Informal 22]

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The following table shows the official totals for the States, the figures being still incomplete :—

State	Yes.	No.
Victoria	304,986	288,749
Queensland	112,279	119,656
New South Wales	296,288	416,251
South Australia	74,580	101,797
West Australia	78,792	31,865
Tasmania	43,829	33,887