The basic premise of the workshop was that the centenary of the First World War would see much discussion of those who fought in the war, but far less about those who sought to oppose or contain it.

Efforts to prevent the outbreak of the war everywhere failed. But in the English-speaking world, there was a second wave of opposition to the introduction of conscription. Here the outcome was more variable, and in Australia, uniquely, opposition to conscription met with success.

The workshop brought together a group of acknowledged experts to reassess this extraordinary conflict and the unique referenda to which it gave rise. The experts included historians, political scientists and sociologists and came from Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Oxford and London. On day one it: (1) placed the conflict in its historical context; (2) examined the supporters and opponents of conscription; and (3) reassessed the referenda and their results. On day two it: (4) compared the conflict in Australia with that in other countries; and (5) explored its legacy. A full list of papers along with the full names and affiliations of contributors can be found in the final workshop program.

This report summarises some of the main findings. The workshop was marked throughout by the extensive participation of contributors and the significant effort that participants had made to read all of the papers in advance. This made for a very full and rich debate on a number of intersecting themes.

The Conflict and its Context (Sessions 1 & 2)

One of the strongest common themes to emerge from the workshop papers and discussion was the importance attached to the impact of ideas in general and the liberal tradition in particular. Papers by Newton, Archer, Bongiorno, Damousi, Lake and Scalmer all discussed the use of freedom language, especially, but not exclusively, on the part of anti-conscriptionists. As Newton put it in discussion, “Labour picked up the central banner of liberty.” Contrary to standard earlier studies that treated the use of this language as either
insincere or unimportant compared to the other underlying interests, these authors treated liberal commitments as central motivations in their own right.

The theme came through most clearly in analyses of the arguments and motivations of anti-conscriptionists as well as their subsequent self-understanding, esp in the papers by Newton, Archer, Bongiorno and Scalmer as well as in the comments of Sawer. This gave rise to debate about different strands of liberalism. Debates recurred about (a) the relationship between radical liberalism and liberal imperialism on the one hand and the New (or Social) Liberalism on the other; (b) the relationship between these British liberal traditions and liberal traditions in Australia (and the United States); and (c) the relationship between the New Liberalism and the labour movement and its anti-conscriptionism. There was also (d) a common recognition of the importance of the language of ‘British liberty’ in Australia.

But there were also a number of variations on this theme. The importance attached to liberal values by pro-conscriptionists was highlighted, esp by Damousi, as well as their more general belief in the morality of the conscription cause, esp by Ziino. Although there was some discussion of how this moral motivations fitted with the manifest concern with maintaining Australia’s reputation in Britain. The question of whether the use of freedom language was better understood as part of a Republican, Civic Humanist or neo-Roman tradition (rather than a liberal one) was raised esp by Bongiorno. And the relationship between Progressivism – arguably a variant of the New Liberalism – and the conscription conflict (particularly in the United States) was raised, especially by Connor and Lake.

A number of other common themes emerged, helpfully highlighted by Holbrook. There was widespread (and orthodox) agreement on the centrality of the labour movement to the conflict. The role of women was also given a good deal of attention in papers and discussion. However the role of religion and sectarian motivations, though present, received less attention than has been typical, perhaps because of a tendency to focus on the first referendum and the lead up to it, and the belief that at that point the role of Archbishop Mannix was much less than is usually thought. The role of racial hostility was also raised, though was not a central theme, perhaps because of doubts about its effect given that both sides made vigorous appeals to it in the referendum campaigns themselves. In addition, there was some discussion of the role socialist and radical left forces, but some contributors noted that the role of Christian pacifism remained an understudied topic.

**The Referendum Results (Session 3)**

Three main findings emerged from the paper presented by Goot on the referendum itself and its results. First, the paper highlighted new evidence on the exceptionally high level of voter turnout. Second, it revisited some of the most influential previous explanations for the results, including those of Turner and Withers, and found a number of serious problems stemming *inter alia* from the ‘ecological fallacy’. And third it examined the relationship between the conscription referenda and constitutional referenda. Goot was
skeptical about the possibility of reaching more satisfactory explanations for the outcomes, given the available data. However, Strangio thought it was still possible to draw some reasonable inferences. In addition, the paper noted that new work could still be done on voting data at the electoral subdivisional level.

**Comparative and Transnational Effects (Session 4)**

Connor undertook the huge task of comparing efforts to introduce conscription throughout the English speaking world. Australia was not the only country to end the war without conscription, but it was the only one that successfully thwarted a concerted effort to introduce it. Connor considered whether different kinds of proximity and distance – temporal, geographic, emotional, cultural and economic – could account for the different outcomes in Britain and its one time settler colonies. He also discussed frequently neglected cases in the West Indies, South Africa and West Africa where concerns with maintaining imperial control sometimes trumped the desire to recruit the maximum number of soldiers.

Two particular comparisons with Australia were discussed in greater detail. McKibbin argued that labour movement opposition was less strenuous in Britain and that the conscription issue more quickly lost its salience there. He also argued that in its overall impact the war was more of a tragedy in Australia than in Britain. Damousi agreed that the proportionate impact on a relatively small Australia was particularly traumatizing. However, Holbrook argued that the war soon became associated with a positive story of nation building. Lake and Connor argued that progressives in the United States were quicker to embrace the universalism to which conscriptionists appealed, though Archer emphasized the extent of congressional hostility and the long tradition of antimilitarism which many Americans invoked.

There was widespread agreement on the importance of transnational effects. Connor spoke of an “English speaking conversation” about conscription. Archer discussed the importance of British traditions as well as the Canadian and American examples in the Australian debate. And Lake examined how transnational influences operated at an individual level among highly influential elites.

**[Paradoxical] Legacies (Session 5)**

The workshop highlighted a paradox about the legacy of the conscription conflict in Australia, especially for political progressives and labour movement activists who opposed conscription. On the one hand, Scalmer argued for the importance of remembering the conflict and its outcome as a striking instance of democracy. He traced the waxing and waning of different interpretations of the meaning of these events over the last one hundred years, and concluded that, while the current emphasize on division and conflict was an understandable corrective to accounts of the war as a largely consensual nation-forming experience, it obscured this legacy. His argument takes issue with some contemporary myth-busters, but fits well with the emphasis on liberal ideas.
that emerged in the workshop as well as with the self-understanding of many activists at the time.

On the other hand, Lake argued that the conflict over conscription helped to stall Australia’s social experimentation. In its wake the country retreated into a kind of British parochialism and international interest in Australia as a social laboratory fell away. Discussion paid particular attention to the potential consequences for the subsequent development of the welfare state that resulted from the different implicit social contracts between the state and its citizens to which the presence or absence of conscription gave rise. In the absence of conscription, veterans (rather than citizen in general) were singled out as worthy of support. Political reforms like women’s suffrage (as in the US and Britain) or the enfranchisement of unskilled male workers (as in Britain) were, it was noted, unavailable, as they had already been achieved in Australia.

Commemorations often claim a certain uniqueness for Australia’s experiences in the First World War. But in truth many of these experiences – like comradeship in the trenches – were witnessed in other belligerents. The conscription conflict is rarely discussed in this way. Yet, as this expert workshop showed, it really was unique. And the resulting referenda and their outcome were a product of other striking features of Australian society – features like the strength of its liberal tradition, its early embrace of democracy, and the precocious political power of its labour movement.

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