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Conscription

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the number of people volunteering to enlist for the Australian Imperial Force was so high that recruitment officers were forced to turn people away. However, as the war continued, casualty rates increased and the number of volunteers declined.

The then Prime Minister, William 'Billy' Hughes, took the issue to the people in a referendum. In October 1916 the nation was asked to grant the Government the power to compel citizens to serve overseas during the current war. It was an argument between the pride Australia had in holding a volunteer army and the manpower need of the Army.

The conscription referendum provoked furious debate within the Australian community with much of the campaign, both for and against, directed at women. As one of the few nations that allowed women the right to vote, Australia's mothers, wives and daughters were in a unique position to influence the outcome of the referendum.

The proposal for conscription was defeated, as was a second referendum in 1917, and Australia continued to field an Army comprised only of volunteers.

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