

GREAT DEBATES: ARGUMENTS FOR CONSCRIPTION

CHARACTER PROFILE

2

Private James Edward **Allen**



Great Debates: Conscription

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Source Analysis Worksheet

Source	What is the source? Who created it?	What information does the source provide?	What argument does this provide your character?	What questions are you left asking?

Biography

Private James Edward **Allen**



“So I think the referendum as good as law.”

AWM ED1605

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E01605/>

Australian soldiers line up to vote on conscription, Western Front, 8 December 1917

It is June 1917. James Allen, a 31-year-old farmer and grazier from Gin Gin, Queensland, is serving on the **Western Front** with the 49th Infantry Battalion. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) has been suffering heavy casualties and enlistments have been falling, leading to a shortage of reinforcements.

The AIF relies solely on volunteers to fill its ranks. Prime Minister Billy Hughes has determined it necessary to introduce a referendum on conscription to address the shortage of men. Hughes has announced the referendum for 20 December, so that Australians can vote on whether conscripts should be sent to war outside the Commonwealth.

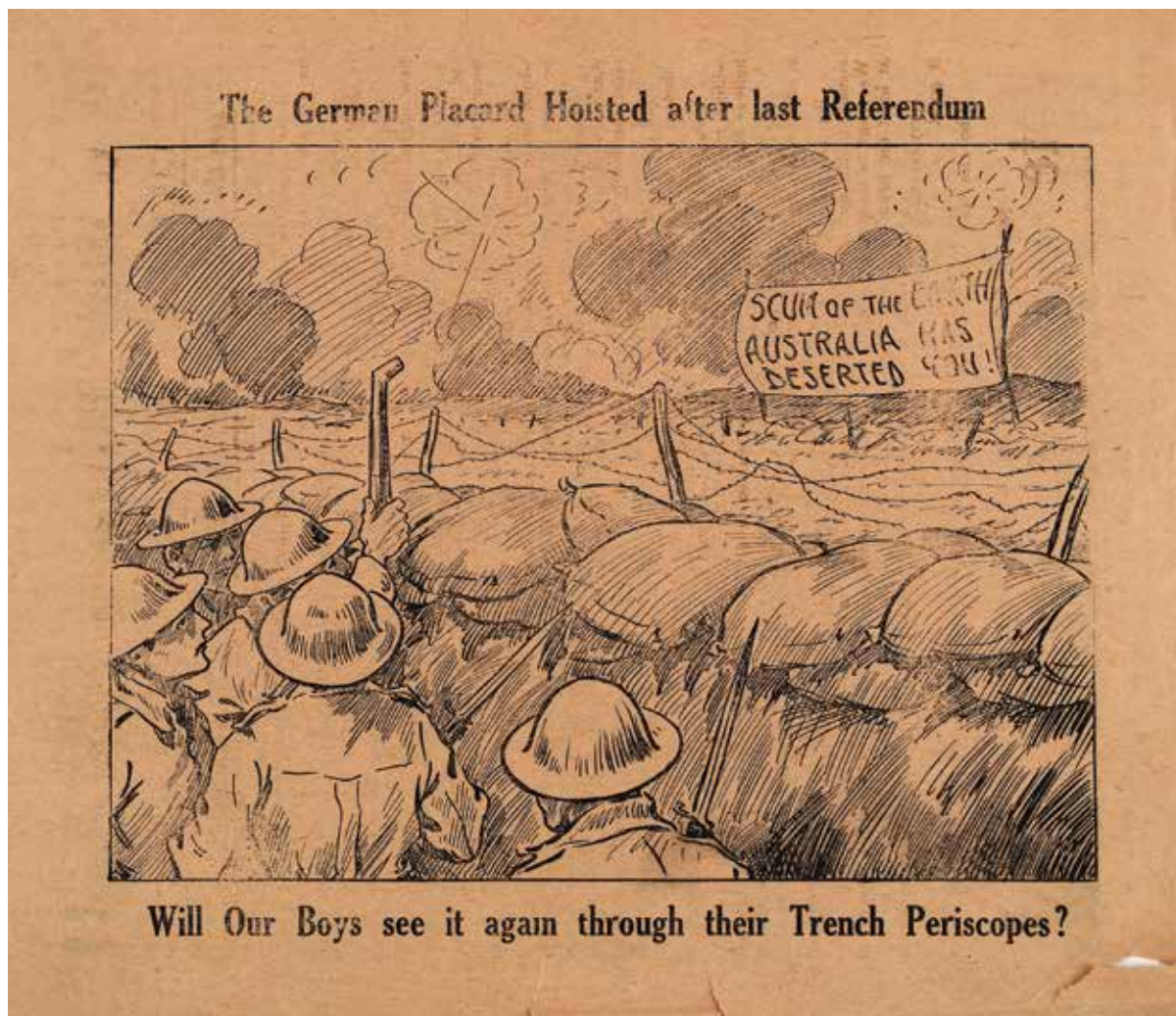
This is not the first time Hughes has called for a referendum on the issue. A previous vote was held in October 1916.

Around the same time, James was preparing to embark for the war. He and some fellow soldiers were in Sydney when they came across an anti-conscription rally. They attacked the meeting and ‘routed’ it (broke it up). Two days later, he departed Sydney to reinforce the AIF on the Western Front.

On 28 October 1916, Australians voted on conscription. The proposal was defeated: 49% voted in favour, 51% were against. Only a narrow majority of soldiers serving in the AIF voted for compulsory overseas service.

James frequently writes letters to his brother, William, in Australia telling him about life on the front. The Allies do not seem to be making any ground, despite the heavy casualties. On 4 June 1917, James writes that he will soon be part of a large offensive on the front. He is killed in action on 7 June 1917. James does not live to vote in the second referendum.

Source 1.1



AWM RC00322

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RC00322/>

Source 1.2

'[The boys] started operations in a minor way last night by charging an anti-conscriptionist meeting. A fair fight followed, but the civies hadn't a possible [chance] though they resorted to diabolical hun methods. Throwing hot ashes and vitriol, some of our lads got burnt a bit, but routed the meeting. On the other hand, Hughes P.M. got a magnificent reception, every conceivable place was packed and the meeting was very orderly. So I think the referendum as good as law.'

A letter from Private Allen to his brother, written on 5 October 1916. AWM 1DRL/0027

See also, *"From your dead soldier son": the conscription referenda 1916-17*, Australian War Memorial, accessed 4 September 2015, <https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2013/11/25/from-your-dead-soldier-son/>

Source 1.3

'The people of Australia have decided that they will not resort to compulsion to fill the ranks of the Australian divisions at the front. The Government accepts the verdict of the people as given on October 28 last. It will not enforce nor attempt to enforce conscription, either by regulation or statute, during the life of the forthcoming Parliament. If, however, national safety demands it, the question will again be referred to the people. That is the policy of the Government on the great question. It is clear and definite.

The Government accepts the verdict of the electors on October 28, and appeals to the patriotism of the people to uphold the honour of Australia by maintaining the Australian divisions at their full fighting strength by voluntary enlistment.

It appeals to the manhood of Australia to strike a blow for this their country. It appeals to every lover of liberty who is fit to take his place in the ranks to go and stand by the side of those heroic men whose glorious deeds gain them fresh laurels every passing day. It appeals to every loyal Australian not to let the supreme sacrifice made by the thousands of young Australian lads who have offered up their lives on the altar of their country be in vain.'

William Morris Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia, speech as part of the election campaign delivered in Bendigo, Victoria, 27 March 1917, in *Australian Federal Election Speeches*, Museum of Australian Democracy <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1917-billy-hughes>

Source 1.4

REINFORCEMENTS

What the Soldiers say:
VOTE YES

Our Men who have fought at Gallipoli, France, and in Palestine, know the desperate straits of their comrades. They know what it is to look with anxious eyes for the reinforcements which mean so much to them. With full knowledge of the position both at the front and in Australia, the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League in Melbourne and Sydney have given their undivided support to the efforts of the Government to gain reinforcements.

Vote YES

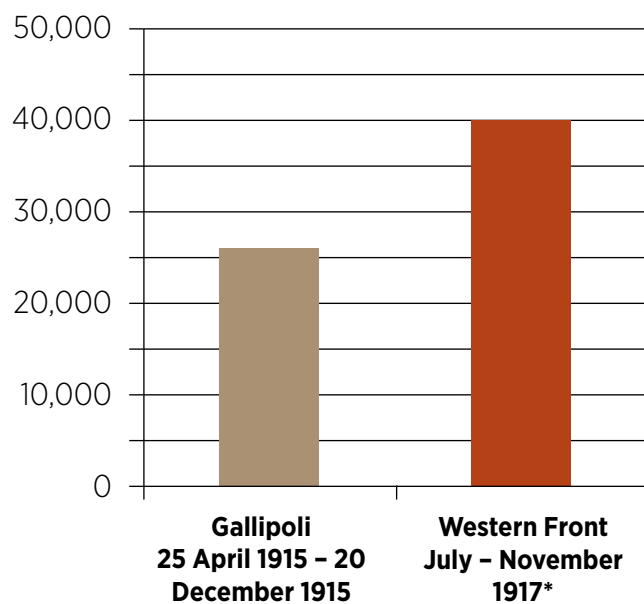
Authorized by the Reinforcements Retention Council, Charles McKay, Publicity Secretary, 308 Collier Street, Melbourne

AWM RC00323

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RC00323/>

Source 1.5

Casualties Comparison*



The heaviest Australian casualties were suffered in the fighting on the Western Front.

Based on *Campaign casualty statistics – First World War (Australia)*, Australian War Memorial, accessed 2 September 2015

* Approximate only

https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/statistics_table.asp#casualty

Source 1.6

CONSCRIPTION
WHAT IT MEANS.

CONSCRIPTION means compelling every fit man who can be spared to do his fair share in defence of Australia and the Empire.

CONSCRIPTION means that New South Wales will provide 170 men a day to reinforce our boys at the Front.

CONSCRIPTION means saving the lives of our boys now at the Front by giving them rest and relief.

CONSCRIPTION means standing by the boys who have made the name of Australia famous.

CONSCRIPTION means doing what England, New Zealand and the Allies have already done.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

CONSCRIPTION does not mean bringing in coloured labour.

CONSCRIPTION does not mean forced labour in Industry.

CONSCRIPTION does not mean ruin to our Industries.

CONSCRIPTION does not mean an attack on Unionism.

And Remember that Conscription in Australia **will cease** automatically **the Day Peace is declared.**

VOTE YES
FOR THE HONOUR OF AUSTRALIA.

Authorised by HECTOR LAMOND & F. J. THOMAS, Dalton House, Pitt Street, Sydney.
John Sands Limited, Sydney.

Conscription, what it means: Vote Yes for the honour of Australia, State Library of NSW,
<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/album/albumView.aspx?itemID=1358197&acmsid=0>

Glossary of terms

conscription	A policy that compels citizens of a nation into military service.
referendum	A public vote called by the government to approve a change to the Australian Constitution. The 1916 and 1917 referenda were in fact plebiscites. A plebiscite, also known as an advisory referendum, is used to decide a national question that does not affect the Constitution. It can be used to test whether the government has sufficient support from the people to go ahead with a proposed action.
Western Front	A series of trenches running from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border, separating the Allied and Central Powers in the First World War.
