

GOING TO WAR



When Britain declared war against Germany in August 1914, Australia was automatically also at war. The Australian Parliament did not debate Australia's entry into World War I; the main consideration was how Australia would support Britain.

Declaration of war

Australia's entry into World War I was not a decision of the Australian Parliament. War was declared in London, not in Melbourne where Parliament was located at the time. This was because Australia, a largely independent nation since federation in 1901, was a dominion of the British Empire. As a dominion, Australia had a constitution which gave the Australian Parliament the power to make laws for Australia; however, Britain still controlled Australia's foreign affairs, and the King had the authority to declare war.

In June 1914 the Parliament had been dissolved (ended) for an election of all members and senators. In early August the Governor-General, Sir Munro Ferguson – concerned by growing tensions in Europe – met with Prime Minister Joseph Cook and some senior members of the government in Melbourne to decide Australia's response to a possible outbreak of war. Australia would commit an expeditionary force (army for overseas service) of 20 000 men and place the Royal Australian Navy under the control of the British Royal Navy. Australia would also pay all costs associated with its involvement in the conflict. The Labor Party opposition supported Australia's involvement in the war and the commitments made by the Liberal Party* government.

The election campaign continued after the declaration of war on 4 August 1914 and both leaders gave speeches strongly supporting Australian involvement in the war. On election day, 5 September 1914, the Labor Party won a majority in both houses of Parliament and formed



STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

Federal Parliament House, Melbourne, Australian Enamellers, c1913

government. The new government, led by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, needed to guide Australia through the difficult period ahead.

It was only when Parliament resumed in October 1914 that parliamentary debate could take place about Australia's commitment to the war. In his opening speech, the Governor-General outlined the new government's response to war. The speeches given in reply were overwhelmingly supportive of the decisions made and the proposed way forward. Some wanted the new government to do even more to help Britain win the war. A small number of members and senators raised concerns, not about Australia's engagement in the war itself, but about the newly introduced *War Precautions Act 1914*, which gave the government special powers to make decisions about managing Australia's war effort without referring to Parliament beforehand.

* The Liberal Party which contested the 1914 election is not the same party as the current Liberal Party of Australia. The Liberal Party merged with expelled members of the Australian Labor Party to form the Nationalist Party of Australia in 1917. The current Liberal Party of Australia was founded in 1944.

Public support

Australians not only accepted that their country was at war, but in many cases enthusiastically embraced the idea. As a dominion of the British Empire, Australians largely considered themselves to be 'Australian Britons'. The country comprised six former British colonies, and most people were migrants or descendants of migrants from the British Isles. The British monarch was the Australian head of state. The majority of Australians believed that it was Australia's duty to assist the 'mother country' in its time of need.

There were also practical reasons for Australians' overwhelmingly positive response to the war. Many were fearful of the German presence in the Pacific and a potential attack on Australia. The Australian Government also shared community concerns about Japan's military growth. Australia, they thought, could not properly defend itself; only the Royal Navy could keep the enemy at bay and Australia safe. These people believed Australia must support Britain in the war, so that Britain could continue to protect Australia.

RIGHT: *The Argus*, 3 August 1914

BELOW: *Our Pledge*, c1914, World War 1 recruitment and patriotic posters: and some relating to the 1916 conscription referendum

