

# PARLIAMENT AND THE WAR



World War I presented the Australian Parliament with the substantial challenge of managing the war on the home front and keeping Australia and Australians safe.

Initially the Parliament was concerned with military recruitment and the local threat of Germany, particularly from the German colony of New Guinea. The Parliament then turned its attention to people of German and Austro-Hungarian heritage living in Australia (enemy aliens) and organisations accused of opposition to or lack of support for the war (unlawful associations).

The economy remained a key concern because Australia needed to fund its war commitments, and the difficult issue of price controls – particularly of food – troubled the Parliament throughout the war years and beyond.



*Daily Telegraph, 8 December 1917*

## War Precautions

The *War Precautions Act 1914* (amended in 1915, 1916 and 1918) was the principal means by which the Australian Government managed the war on the home front. The Act gave the Governor-General, on the advice of the government, the power to make regulations\* for "securing the public safety and defence of the Commonwealth".

Although these powers were far-reaching, the Act encountered little opposition in Parliament. Most members believed that during wartime it was essential the government have the powers it needed to defend Australia, even if some civil liberties were restricted. As the Leader of the Opposition Joseph Cook stated: "Everything must be made to bend in war time to the supreme purpose of making the State safe." (House of Representatives debate, 23 April 1915)

It was also believed these special powers would only be for the duration of the war, which was expected to be over quickly. Potential opponents were reassured by the government's commitment that War Precautions regulations would be used carefully. The Attorney-General W.M. (Billy) Hughes insisted: "It will never be used except as a last resort in a desperate emergency." (House of Representatives debate, 28 April 1915)

However, by the end of the war the Act was still in place and more than 100 regulations had been made under it. The Act had been used to censor the press, prosecute people who campaigned against recruitment, fix the price of food items and intern persons of German and Austrian descent. The *War Precautions Act 1914* was finally repealed in 1920.

\* Regulations are a type of delegated legislation used by the Parliament to provide more flexibility in the law-making process. Under the *War Precautions Act 1914* the Governor-General, acting on the advice of the Australian Government, was delegated (given) the power to make regulations in areas covered by the Act. Regulations have the same force as law.

## Enemy Aliens

Australians enthusiastically embraced the declaration of war. Many enlisted to fight Germans abroad and the public became suspicious and hostile towards ‘Germans’ at home. Along with renaming towns and products that sounded German, the government was encouraged to act to monitor those with German ancestry.

Initially, the government required that all German and Austrian citizens register at local police stations and advise any change of address. However, anti-German feeling continued and resulted in some workers losing their jobs and businesses being boycotted, along with the forced closure of some Lutheran schools and churches.

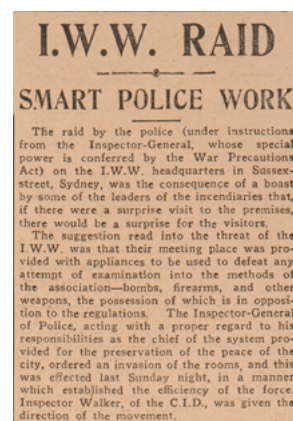
Eventually, the government set up special camps and interned those classified as ‘enemy aliens’ – persons who were citizens of enemy nations. Some internees were then deported from Australia. The description of enemy aliens was also broadened to include Germans who had become British subjects in Australia and to those born in Australia to German parents.

The internment of enemy aliens – almost 7 000 by war’s end – was not evenly applied across Australia. In places with larger populations of German speaking people, who were well integrated into Australian life and politically represented, such as the Barossa Valley in South Australia, very few were interned. In other locations, such as around Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, where there were small numbers of recently arrived German citizens, many were interned and deported.

## Unlawful Association

Many Australians were also concerned about groups they considered disloyal to the nation and the war effort. One organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World – the IWW or ‘Wobblies’ as they were often known, particularly troubled the government. The IWW was a relatively small association with no more than 2 000 members, but they were involved in strike action and considered to be a radical union group with foreign leaders and ideas. The Wobblies believed society was divided by class and accused the capitalists (business owners) of exploiting the working class in order to profit from the war.

The government was determined to disrupt and ultimately eliminate the organisation. To do so, it used some of the regulations of the *War Precautions Act 1914–15* to restrict IWW publications and then introduced a law to declare the IWW an unlawful association. The Parliament approved the *Unlawful Associations Act 1916* (amended in 1917) which made meetings of the IWW illegal and allowed for the arrest, imprisonment and, in some cases, the deportation of IWW leaders. More than 100 Wobblies were imprisoned and a number of senior officials, who could not prove they were born in Australia, were deported – mainly to Chile. The government hoped that this firm response would send a strong message to other groups not to speak out against the war and interfere with Australia’s war effort.



ABOVE: *The Mirror*, 28 July 1917

LEFT: *Internees and guards at a road construction, Torrens Island internment camp, South Australia, c1914*

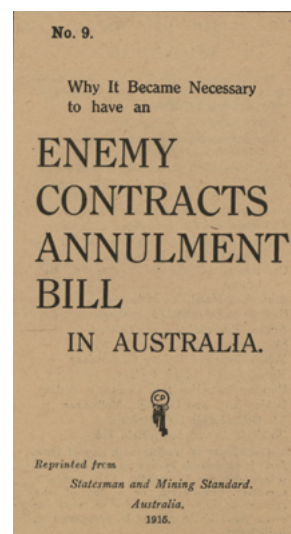




## Trade with the enemy

The *Trading with the Enemy Act 1914*, passed soon after Parliament resumed in October 1914, prohibited all trade with Germany and its allies, and with companies controlled by enemy nationals. This Act, along with the *Enemy Contracts Annulment Act 1915*, ensured the majority of Australian trade would continue to be with Britain and the British Empire. The government hoped this policy would be reciprocated by Britain. However, Britain did not support this and maintained its trade with the United States of America and its European allies.

The *Enemy Contracts Annulment Act 1915* allowed for contracts with German companies to be cancelled and provided for 'Australian' control of 'German' businesses in Australia. Before the war German firms had been extensively involved in the base metals industry, particularly the mining of lead, zinc and copper. The war effort required greater mineral and heavy industry production, particularly for steel, and 'Australian' companies such as the Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited (BHP) were able to benefit from the new laws and rapidly expand to meet the demand.



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*Why it became necessary to have an enemy contracts annulment bill in Australia, reprinted from the Statesman and Mining Standard, 1915*

## Price Fixing

The high price of essential goods, caused by the war-time disruption to trade, rising inflation, unemployment and drought, was an issue frequently raised in Parliament. Controlling prices was difficult because there were many competing interests and constitutional limitations as to how the Australian Parliament could respond.

The ability to fix prices was considered a state issue and some states did attempt to control prices, but these measures were largely unsuccessful. Referendums to give the Australian Parliament the power to control prices had been defeated in 1911 and 1913. Prime Minister Fisher's government committed to try again in 1915 but the idea was abandoned when W.M. (Billy) Hughes became Prime Minister the same year.

Many working families continued to resent the high prices being paid for flour, sugar, meat and other items, and questioned whether everyone was contributing equally to the war effort.

They were sending their sons to fight for Australia while others seemed to be making big profits from the war. Eventually, the government was compelled to act and, rather than attempt another difficult referendum process, chose to use the *War Precautions Act 1914–16* to fix the price of some basic foodstuffs and animal feed. However, the measure did not prove popular with everyone, especially farmers who had benefited from high prices for their products.



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*The Australian Worker*, 22 April 1915