Australians enthusiastically supported Britain (the Mother country) during World War I. The leaders of both the main political parties vowed to help Britain until victory was achieved. Half the eligible men of military age volunteered to join the armed forces.

By mid 1915 the death columns in the newspapers were swollen with death notices and tributes to Australians killed in action. By July 1916 the numbers killed and wounded in just three weeks in the battle for Pozieres in France was greater than the terrible losses over eight months on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Australia's small population was running out of able-bodied volunteers.

**Conscription**

Prime Minister Billy Hughes decided that the time had come to introduce conscription (compulsory military service for all able-bodied men). Most members of his party, the Labor Party, were against conscription. Together with many Australians, they were committed to winning the war but they felt that enough sacrifices were being made and that other countries should take on more responsibility. Hughes held a plebiscite in October 1916 to find out whether the Australian people supported his idea.

The plebiscite was narrowly defeated: 52 per cent of the nation voted against it and 48 per cent in favour. Many who voted against conscription were happy to volunteer and were proud of family members who volunteered, but they felt it was important that individuals should not be forced to fight against their will. Other opponents of conscription felt that the war was England's war not Australia's.

The conscription issue caused much bitterness in Australia. Those in favour felt that conscription was necessary to win the war and many branded opponents as unpatriotic traitors to their British heritage for leaving brave volunteers to face death in times of national danger.

**A split in the Labor Party**

The issue of conscription split the Labor Party. Hughes and 25 Labor members of Parliament left the Labor Party and joined with the Liberal opposition to form a new political party called the Nationalist Party. They made Hughes their leader. The Nationalist Party had the numbers to govern and Hughes remained Prime Minister.

In 1917 Hughes lost a second plebiscite to conscript men into the fighting forces.

**The end of World War I**

The war officially ended on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918. Australia was given control of the former German colonies of north-east Papua New Guinea and islands to its north by the Treaty of Versailles.