



Conservatism and change:
the RSL and Australian society, 1916-1932

David Hood

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Abstract

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This thesis has two main themes: a history of the RSL in its formative years, and a study of the RSL and conservatism in Australia between 1916 and 1932. By looking at the RSL as an agent of both reaction and change, the thesis hopes to contribute to an understanding of what it meant to be conservative in Australia during and after the first world war.

The thesis argues that while many of the RSL's values, particularly the belief that political change should be gradual not sudden, conformed to those central to conservative ideology, in certain domestic matters such as repatriation and social welfare the RSL contributed significantly to change in Australian society. The thesis concentrates particularly on Australians' increased acceptance of a more interventionist state, and looks at the way in which its war experience caused the RSL to evolve attitudes toward state intervention which ran counter to those of many conservatives.

The thesis also looks at the way in which nationalism shifted from the possession of the Left before the war to that of the Right after 1915. It argues that the first world war had a profound effect on the subsequent direction of Australian society, and that the RSL had a role in this. It concludes that one of the enduring legacies of the first world war was that the vision and idealism of the prewar era were overtaken and replaced by a conservative preoccupation with national stability, national safety, and national integrity.

Statement

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any University and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

David Hood

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Preface

This is a thesis about the activities and attitudes of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia between 1916 and 1932, and how the character of conservatism in Australia changed after the first world war. The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia was formed as a national body encompassing the state branches in June 1916. This thesis calls the national body the 'RSL' or 'League', and the state branches the 'South Australian RSL', the 'Victorian RSL', and so on. Returned Soldiers' Associations were formed in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia before the RSL was, and these are described in this thesis as 'RSAs'. Many state RSL branches continued to use 'RSA' after the national body was formed. The League became 'The Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia' after the outbreak of the second world war, and in October 1965 officially adopted the name 'The Returned Services League of Australia'.

Because of the complexity of combining a history of an organisation with a study of

the evolution of ideas, each chapter of this thesis begins with an introduction that outlines the framework of the chapter's argument. The conclusion to each chapter summarises its main points, places it in the context of the argument being developed throughout the thesis, and points towards the next chapter. In this way, it is hoped to demonstrate that the RSL was both a product of a society undergoing profound change as a result of the first world war, and a contributor to that change.

Originally, the thesis intended to establish how tradition and experience shaped the outlook of the South Australian branch of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia in the 1920s and 1930s. Three things led to expanding this.

First, it became obvious that the Australian experience of the first world war was, indeed, a national experience. In general, a Queenslander's war experience was likely to be little different from a South Australian's or a Victorian's, whether he or she was in France or Australia. If the South Australian experience was typical of the Australian experience, it seemed important to say so.

Second, the origins and structure of the RSL itself seemed both to reflect the national character of Australia's war experience and to substantiate it. Although not all state branches initially joined the RSL, and although there was frequently disharmony among them, the RSL remained a federal organisation, responding to the demands of the individual state branches while ensuring that they acted within a defined national policy. To understand the actions and attitudes of the South Australian RSL branch, it became necessary to understand those of its state counterparts and the federal body.

Third, it became impossible to examine the RSL without grappling with what it meant to be 'conservative' in Australia during the first world war and in the years after. This led to a change in emphasis in the thesis. Instead of a thesis in which, to understand the RSL, it was necessary to examine what was meant by the term conservatism, it seemed more fruitful to study the RSL not as end in itself but as a means to understanding the broader question of how and why conservatism was changed by the first world war.

The sources this thesis draws upon reflect this process of change. The principal

sources are those which relate to the South Australian branch of the RSL. These South Australian records also contain a great deal of federal material, which has been supplemented by examination of federal RSL records in Canberra. Sub-branch correspondence is poorly represented in the South Australian records: inquiries to a number of sub-branches throughout South Australia did not elicit material. Nevertheless, sub-branch resolutions were extensively reported in South Australian publications such as *Diggers' Gazette* (the official journal of the South Australian RSL) and *Returned Soldier* (an independent journal), and there is an abundance of sub-branch material from all states in the national records in Canberra. Thus, while the predominance of South Australian material reflects the initial emphasis of this thesis, it remains a thesis about the Australian RSL because recourse to the federal material held in both Adelaide and Canberra has allowed the thesis to determine when attitudes were those of the South Australian RSL, when they were the attitudes of state branches as opposed to the federal branch, and when they represented the organisation as a whole.

The thesis is about the formative years of the RSL, and its primary focus is on the period 1916 to 1932. The thesis argues that, by 1932, the RSL had developed a character and direction in marked contrast to those of the immediate postwar years. 1932 is also a year in which RSL membership increased significantly from the previous year, marking the beginning of a period of growth which continued to the outbreak of war in 1939. From 1932 too, the RSL became increasingly preoccupied with Australia's capacity to defend itself in time of war, a concern given added impetus when Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in March the following year. The last chapter, chapter 8, surveys the years 1932 to 1939. It is neither a comprehensive nor detailed examination of this period, but a speculative outline which suggests that, by 1932, the RSL had turned in on itself, eschewing the vision of Australia it had espoused in the immediate postwar years and concentrating instead on the welfare of its own members and on keeping Australia safe. These were conservative ends, a conservatism born of the nature of postwar Australian society and of the RSL's own fears.



Introduction

The history of the formative years of the RSL is a history of apparent contradictions. The RSL wholeheartedly supported the 'Yes' campaign in the 1916 and 1917 conscription plebiscites¹ and endorsed its president's nomination as Nationalist Party candidate for the Senate², but just over two years later it dumped him because he had been 'in the unfortunate position of being in politics'³, and replaced him with an anti-conscriptionist who boasted that 'nobody knew his politics because he had none'.⁴ The various state returned soldier associations originated from clubrooms that had been established by public subscription through patriotic organisations⁵, yet the RSL quickly rejected any form of public benevolence and

¹ See, for example, *Advertiser*, 25 September 1916, 18 December 1917.

² Minutes of the Central Council of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, RSL State Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter Central Council Minutes), 31 May 1917, 3.

³ *Advertiser*, 19 July 1919.

⁴ Entry on Gilbert Dyett in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 8, Melbourne, 1981; K.S. Inglis, 'Returned Soldiers in Australia, 1918-1939', *Collected Seminar Papers on the Dominions Between the Wars*, 13 (1970-1), 60.

⁵ G.L. Kristianson, 'The Establishment of the R.S.L.', *Stand-To*, 8:2 (March/April 1965), 19.

insisted on a role for government which was anathema to the civilians who had been instrumental in the RSL's formation. In late 1918 and 1919 the RSL, alarmed at what it saw as the influence of 'Bolshevism' in returned soldier riots in several capital cities, formed an 'Anti-Bolshevik Committee' and an 'Army to Fight Bolshevism'⁶, but was itself identified as vulnerable to 'Bolshevik' infiltration⁷ and as comprising a 'Bolshie element'.⁸ The RSL condemned the Labor Party for its wartime stand and fought what it saw as the labour movement's efforts to erode the principle of returned soldier preference in employment, yet the labour movement's support for repatriation measures 'which would help the working man who had gone away to fight' contributed to a sympathetic environment for returned soldiers⁹ and the RSL's fight for government job creation schemes helped unemployed unionists.¹⁰

This thesis seeks to explain these apparent contradictions, but it is not a

⁶ G.L. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, Canberra, 1966, 13.

⁷ Censor to Defence Dept, 9 February 1919, 'Bolshevism in Queensland', Australian Archives, Canberra, CRS A3934, SC5 (i).

⁸ Mark Lyons, *Legacy*, Melbourne, 1978, 4.

⁹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 14-15.

¹⁰ See, for example, Congress, 11 November 1924, Central Council Minutes, n.p.

comprehensive history of the RSL's formative years. Such a history would have to look at the three main areas of RSL activity, the social, the benevolent, and the political. The importance of the first two cannot be overlooked. In 1967 and 1968 Bill Gammage asked 139 first world war veterans their reasons for joining the RSL. Most replied that it was to 'fight for concessions or rights' or to 'see old mates', or both.¹¹ This thesis asks why veterans joined the RSL, and looks at the attitudes behind the fight for concessions or rights. But it is not a history of the RSL as a social welfare organisation, and therefore does not look in detail at what concessions the RSL actually gained. Nor is it a history of the RSL as a social club, except where the RSL's function as a social club had a bearing on its success in general.

The thesis concentrates on the political pressure group activities of the RSL, concerns itself with what was and is meant by 'conservative' in postwar Australia, and asks whether the RSL fits this meaning. It looks at ways in which the South Australian state branch conformed to and differed from the

¹¹ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Ringwood, Vic., 1975, 271.

attitudes of the other state branches and the federal body. By looking at the RSL as an agent of both reaction and change, the thesis hopes to contribute to an understanding of how the first world war changed the character of conservatism in Australia.

The 'digger' has played a pivotal role in Australian society since the first world war. Geoffrey Serle has argued that, before the first world war, nationalism - the 'clear' expression of primary loyalty to Australia and not to Britain or the Empire - was the preserve of a radical minority comprising 'some of the native-born, Irish Australians and the working class'.¹² Serle notes that, by 1918,

a marked change in the balance of Australian loyalties to Australia, Britain and the Empire is apparent. From then on all classes and sections were to feel a keen sense of Australian patriotism; from then on few Australians would think of themselves as anything but primarily Australians rather than Britishers or Englishmen in the colonies.¹³

¹² Geoffrey Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', *Meanjin*, xxiv:2 (1965), 150.

¹³ *ibid.*

The war alone did not bring about this change. Assailed by economic depression, 'the Boer War and the influence of jingo-imperialism, and growing realisation of Australia's necessary military dependence on Britain', the radical nationalist movement lost much of its momentum by 1900.¹⁴ It would be misleading to describe the first decade of this century as a 'vacuum' for nationalism. But given the waning of the radical nationalist movement, it is interesting to speculate on what direction Australian nationalism might have taken were it not for the war.

The end of the war found nationalism firmly in the grasp of the Right. But while this nationalism excluded the 'radical and anti-Imperial element of the old Labor-oriented nationalism', it also allowed a much wider group of Australians to identify themselves as Australian patriots without sacrificing their sense of Imperial loyalty.¹⁵ As Geoffrey Serle has said, after the war one could be distinctly 'Australian' while at the same time being a conservative imperialist.¹⁶

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, Melbourne, 1973, 90.

This transformation was made possible by the achievements of the AIF¹⁷, and Australian soldiers became both the 'supreme repository of patriotic values' during the war¹⁸ and the flagbearers of the new nationalism after it. Serle has argued that the RSL was one of the 'classic components of this new right-wing nationalism', evincing a strong Australian nationalism while being 'strongly anti-Labor and fanatically loyal still to Crown and Empire'.¹⁹ The RSL developed into an enormously influential pressure group, one Serle believes 'has probably been far stronger in Australia than in any other country'²⁰ and which he attributes to 'the importance of the first war in Australian history, its effect in shaping and firming Australian nationalism, and in the proud sense of achievement and sacrifice felt by the soldiers themselves'.²¹

There have been a number of studies on the RSL²² but the major scholarly work

¹⁷ Serle, 'The Digger Tradition', 151.

¹⁸ Marilyn Lake, *A Divided Society*, Melbourne, 1975, 69.

¹⁹ Serle, 'The Digger Tradition', 156.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 155.

²¹ *ibid.*, 156.

²² See, for example, Phillip Briant (prod. and dir.), *Warriors, Welfare and Eternal Vigilance*, ABC Radio Talks and Documentaries, 1983; Loftus Hills (v. 1) and Arundel Deane (v. 2), *The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia: Its Origins, History, Achievements and Ideals*, Melbourne,

remains G.L. Kristianson's *The Politics of Patriotism*, published in 1966. Kristianson provides a useful description of the RSL's formation during the first world war and the social and political environment surrounding it. Thereafter, however, his narrative focusses almost exclusively on the struggle between RSL federal president Gilbert Dyett and various opponents over the pressure group tactics of the organisation. Kristianson argues that, while Dyett maintained his authority throughout the 1920s and 1930s, RSL tactics changed to allow state branches greater opportunity to influence government beyond the formal, high-level and generally low-key channels which Dyett preferred. The second part of his book is devoted entirely to an analysis of the structure, decision-making process and effectiveness of the RSL, with emphasis post 1945. The main shortcoming of Kristianson's work is that, while it provides a valuable overview of the RSL's chief concerns such as employment preference, immigration and defence during the 1920s and

1927 and 1938; G.L. Kristianson, 'The Establishment of the R.S.L.', *Stand-To*, 8:2 (March/April 1965), 19-26; C. Lucas, 'The R.S.L. in South Australia 1945-1954', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1963; Peter Sekules and Jacqueline Rees, *Lest we forget: the history of the Returned Services League 1916-1986*, Dee Why West, N.S.W., 1980.

1930s, it does not explain the relationship between the organisation and the society in which it developed. It is a book with more appeal to the social scientist than the social historian. The reader is unsure to what extent the RSL was the way it was because it was an ex-service organisation or because its members were Australian.

Kristianson's book is a good starting point for the researcher who wants to find out about Australia through the RSL but it is necessary for that researcher to look further.

This thesis attempts to put both the RSL and the digger firmly in the context of Australian society. It is particularly concerned with the question, 'Was the RSL a conservative organisation?', but it offers at the outset no clear-cut definition of what constituted conservative thought in Australia in the years following the first world war. This is partly because a definition is necessarily developed progressively, and partly because a simple, rigid definition is not apt. There is, for example, the question of what constitutes conservative ideology. R.J. White, in *The Conservative Tradition*, describes conservative ideology as concerned with reality, not ideas, and with nature and

life, not formulas. While conservative philosophy believes in humankind's capability to improve its lot, it is also concerned with maintaining the status quo.²³ Trevor Botham, writing of the so-called 'Red Flag Riots' in Brisbane in March 1919, identifies conservative concern with the status quo as particularly significant. Conservative ideology, he argues, holds that the present social order is the result of thousands of years of slow and logical development, opposes quick change or new, untried schemes, accepts inequality as part of the natural social order, maintains that concrete experience is superior to ideology, believes in evolution not revolution, and shuns radicalism. All this, Botham states, means that conservatism 'can generally be seen as a system of ideas or beliefs employed to justify established social order against any fundamental challenge to its nature and being ... Change, if necessary, should be gradual'.²⁴

Obviously 'conservatism' has connotations beyond the ideological. In Australian historiography, as we have seen,

²³ R.J. White (ed.), *The Conservative Tradition*, London, 1950, 3.

²⁴ Trevor Botham, 'The Red Flag Riots', BA (Hons) thesis, Australian National University, 1975, 51-53.

one use is in relation to a change in the possession, character and extent of nationalism as a result of the first world war. But there are problems in using the term conservative as in 'conservative imperialist' or 'conservative nationalist'. For example, do we describe a person who wholeheartedly embraces the cause of Empire in supporting Australia's participation in the first world war but who is at the same time an ardent voluntarist as any less a conservative imperialist than the person who supports the war and who believes that conscription is necessary? And what of those who advocate radical means to realise conservative ends? If, for example, an individual or organisation promotes state spending on job creation schemes during the depression - a radical proposal - but does so partly or wholly through a 'conservative' fear that widespread unemployment makes a society susceptible to 'Bolshevism', is the proposal radical or conservative? This thesis avoids using the label 'conservative' unless its sense has been clearly stated, or where the context is obvious: for example, the phrase 'conservative disappointment with the 1916 conscription referendum result was repeated in 1917' makes it clear that 'conservative'

in this sense refers to 'conservative imperialists' who supported Australia's participation in the war and believed that conscription was necessary to further this participation. One goal of this thesis is to examine ways in which conservatives differed from each other while continuing to adhere to essential tenets of conservatism.

Another kind of conservatism is also particularly relevant to this thesis - 'digger' conservatism. M.E. Hardy notes that 'traditional' conservatism evinces a 'natural pessimism'. In 'digger' conservatism, the pessimism was not 'natural', but was arrived at by the erosion through experience of initial 'idealism' and 'optimism'.²⁵ Serle agrees that there was 'a great fund of idealism in the early returned soldiers' movement', but argues that it was the 'natural, backward-looking element' in the RSL's thinking, not Hardy's 'course of events', which led to its evolving into an organisation concerned with maintaining the status quo and emphasising conformity.²⁶

Some of the questions raised in this thesis, and some of its conclusions, have

²⁵ M.E. Hardy, 'Digger Conservatism', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1970, 124.

²⁶ Serle, 'The Digger Tradition', 156-7.

been examined by historians of other societies and ex-service organisations. The historian of the British Legion, Graham Wootton, has commented that it is necessary to analyse the political culture of an organisation's formative years to understand its later reactions to particular circumstances.²⁷ This thesis takes up Wootton's comment and argues that the RSL's early development and the political and social culture of the war years were critically important to the organisations's subsequent evolution.

Stephen R. Ward, in a comparative analysis of studies of veterans' organisations in Britain, France, Germany and the United States, has suggested that it was national rather than war experience which determined the actions of veterans.²⁸ This thesis examines whether this was true of the RSL. Ward has also commented on membership crises of British organisations during the 1920s, noting that, by mid-1920, all six separate veterans' organisations in Britain suffered a decline 'as interest waned, and the enthusiastic campaigns for increased

²⁷ Graham Wootton, *The Politics of Influence*, London, 1963, 11.

²⁸ Stephen R. Ward, *The War Generation*, Port Washington, N.Y., 1975, 5.

benefits, rehabilitation of the disabled, employment, and other issues lost out to civilian concerns of family, job and home'.²⁹ This thesis identifies a similar decline in RSL membership up to about 1925 followed by a gradual increase up to the outbreak of the second world war. It suggests that veterans' issues had a limited life as the war receded into the past and that, to survive, veterans' organisations had to seize upon issues of a more universal nature or those which dealt with the future rather than the past. In the RSL's case, this was accomplished by eschewing visionary and 'political' issues and concentrating on 'bread and butter' welfare matters and defence concerns.

Perhaps the most striking of Ward's conclusions is that very few British veterans took an active or leading role in British affairs or had any impact on British society in the decade following the war. Instead 'assimilation seemed far more characteristic of the war generation than any other trait'.³⁰ This thesis argues that returned soldiers in Australia never assimilated into Australian society to the same extent as Ward suggests their British comrades did, both

²⁹ *ibid.*, 28.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 29.

because they were unable to and because they did not want to. Australian soldiers maintained a sense of difference from other Australians, and post-war Australian society was always divided, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, between those who had fought and those who had not.³¹

The formation of the RSL differed from that of British ex-service organisations, too. K.S. Inglis, noting that the RSL grew spontaneously 'out of the ranks of the AIF', argues that this was quite unlike the principal ex-service bodies in the U.K. and the U.S.A.':

Earl Haig founded the British Legion in order to prevent the discharged Tommies from becoming Bolshies. Theodore Roosevelt's son became head of the new American Legion, with similar intent.³²

³¹ Lake, *A Divided Society*, 101-102.

³² K.S. Inglis, 'Returned Soldiers in Australia, 1918-1939', *Institute of Commonwealth Studies* ('The Dominions Between the Wars'), University of London, October 1970 - March 1971, 59-60. Although Wootton has claimed that the British National Association was also a 'spontaneous growth from below' (*Politics of Influence*, 86), Ward has pointed out that, despite the Association's claims to grassroots origins, 'even it had begun with Trades and Labour Council support' (*The War Generation*, 19).

This thesis notes that the returned soldier associations from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia which met in May 1916 to discuss establishing a national organisation all grew from civilian bodies. It looks at the social and political makeup of the South Australian RSL's civilian 'parent' group, the Cheer Up Society, in the context of the wider social and political environment of wartime Australia. It examines not only the widening gulf between returned soldiers and civilians, but also Lake's contention that there was a great deal of difference in the outlook of those soldiers who returned to Australia between 1916 and 1918, when society was bitterly divided over the conduct of the war, and those who returned when the war was over.³³ To this end, it deals at length with the conscription debates, because conscription was the first major issue the RSL faced as a national organisation, because it was an issue on which civilian and soldier attitudes both coalesced and diverged, and because the conscription debates provide the first evidence of the RSL's evolving a definition of loyalty which set it apart from other 'loyalist' bodies.

³³ Lake, *A Divided Society*, 117, 126-7.

Another British study, that by Arthur Marwick on British society during the first world war, is particularly relevant to Chapter Two of this thesis, which argues that the RSL evolved a significantly different attitude to the role of the state than its civilian supporters. Marwick has noted that, despite unique wartime circumstances, 'ruling opinion' in Britain 'was still against Government interference in the free play of the market, and, indeed, against too much Government action in any direction once the necessary measures of national self-defence had been taken'.³⁴ National self-defence often excluded government aid for soldiers and their families. Amid this social and political climate in Britain, charitable organisations rose to the fore in asserting their traditional role of gathering and selectively dispensing public benevolence.³⁵ In the early years of the war, the help of

³⁴ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge. British Society and the First World War*, London, 1975, 42. The point is also made by Wootton, who has argued that, in Britain at the outbreak of the war, 'a narrow conception of the role of government was reflected in the various attitudes and practices governing the treatment of the families of serving soldiers and of the ex-service community in general'. Assisting the wives of soldiers in distress, for example, was not the business of the government. Wootton, *Politics of Influence*, 11.

³⁵ Marwick, *The Deluge*, 42.

these private organisations was both actively sought and deemed necessary by the British government because the apparatus did not exist at the state level to cope with such unprecedented demand.³⁶ It quickly became obvious, however, that the scale of the task was completely beyond the capacity of these voluntary societies, and the government was forced to intervene. A Select Committee was appointed, and as a result a Naval and Military War Pensions Act was passed in November 1915 which was 'still, in essence, an attempt to integrate private charity and public appeal into Government action'.³⁷

To what extent did Australian society mirror that of Britain in regard to the role of the state and the desirability or necessity of combining private and public means to cope with the circumstances of war? Although disagreement in Australia between conservatives, liberals and socialists over the role of the state had a long history before the outbreak of the first world war, two broad schools of thought dominated the debate by 1914. One favoured a universal scheme of welfare assistance and argued that the state should assume more responsibility

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*, 43.

for the well-being of certain classes of its citizens, such as the aged, destitute, and the invalid.³⁸ This attitude was closely identified with the Labor Party in Australia, and was part of an overall philosophy which argued that it was legitimate to use the power of the state to bring about social reform.³⁹ But many Australians disagreed. Conservatives saw the establishment of state enterprises as a form of socialism⁴⁰, and strongly resisted state intervention in a wide range of areas. These included that of public benevolence, which had traditionally been the province of private charitable organisations or individuals. Conservatives believed that welfare assistance distributed by the state along universalist principles eroded the self-reliance of the individual and resulted in his or her pauperisation.⁴¹

³⁸ Brian Dickey, *No Charity There. A Short History of Social Welfare in Australia*, Melbourne, 1980, 141-142, 163.

³⁹ D.J. Murphy, *Labour in Politics. The State Labour Parties in Australia 1880-1920*, University of Queensland, 1975, 15.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 8.

⁴¹ Dickey, *No Charity There*, 141. In 1930 W.K. Hancock argued that Australians were more willing to accept a higher state profile than their counterparts in Britain and the United States because Australians believed that 'the State means collective power at the service of individualistic "rights"', and that the Australian therefore perceived no conflict 'between his individualism and his reliance upon Government'. W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, London, 1930 (this edition Brisbane 1961), 55.

Chapter Two argues that, as in Britain, the war led Australians to accept a more interventionist state, and that government had to intervene in areas traditionally the realm of private organisations and individuals. In examining the establishment of patriotic bodies during the war years, and the ways in which they drew on the membership and attitudes of prewar benevolent organisations, the thesis argues that there was a fundamental difference in attitude towards repatriation between these groups, which saw a prime role for charitable bodies and private individuals, and the RSL, which believed that the state should be responsible for all facets of repatriation. The thesis examines the hybrid system of government and private administration which evolved and the RSL's objection to this system, an objection which contributed to changed community attitudes towards what was an acceptable level of intervention into everyday life by the state. Therefore while this thesis agrees with Serle that there were elements of 'backward-looking' in the RSL's thinking⁴², it also identifies the phenomenon of a more interventionist state as an area in which the

⁴² Serle, 'The Digger Tradition', 156-157.

RSL was both a manifestation and an agent of change.

A further theme of this thesis in assessing the nature of the RSL and of conservatism in postwar Australian society is the difficulty the RSL had in moulding and portraying itself as 'non-political'. Two main factions are identified within the RSL, one which argued that the organisation should take a definite political stand, and the other which distinguished between 'political' matters and matters of 'national interest' and argued that the RSL should be 'non-political'. In the light of Lloyd Robson's argument that RSL leaders knew that the organisation could not remain totally non-political⁴³, and Alfred Vagts's contention that the claim to be neutral and above party strife was typical of military men in politics⁴⁴, two key questions addressed in this section are whether the RSL's claims to be non-political were genuinely held or mere rhetoric, and, if the former, whether this was a radical or conservative choice.

So far as the evidence permits, the thesis also looks at that most extreme

⁴³ L.L. Robson, *Australia in the Nineteen Twenties*, Melbourne, 1980, 10-11.

⁴⁴ Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, New York, 1959, 316.

manifestation of veterans' conservatism, participation in ultra-loyalist or right-wing paramilitary organisations. Manning Clark, writing on the experience of Pozières, has observed that '[n]o human being would ever know ... why, when the survivors got back to Australia, they should become the backbone of the King and Empire Alliance to suppress and expel all anti-loyalists, all Bolsheviks, Sinn Feiners, and "Wobblies"'.⁴⁵ This thesis agrees that some returned soldiers held such attitudes and joined ultra-loyalist or right-wing paramilitary organisations, but argues that it is equally important to study those who did not.

Wootton, writing of the British Legion, has argued that it is at least as useful to ask why an extremist ex-servicemen's organisation did not develop in Britain as to ask why some organisations with an ex-service component did.⁴⁶ That question is relevant to Australia. Humphrey McQueen has argued that the RSL could not have supplied the New Guard with the majority of its members because it did not have enough members to have done so⁴⁷, but recent studies of veterans during

⁴⁵ Manning Clark, 'Tramping the Battlefields', *Overland*, 100 (1985), 7.

⁴⁶ Wootton, *The Politics of Influence*, 11.

⁴⁷ Humphrey McQueen, 'The Social Character of the New Guard', *Arena*, 40 (1975), 67-86.

the interwar period still tend to concentrate on those who joined such organisations.⁴⁸ It is easy to lose sight of the fact that far right organisations in Australia recruited a mere fraction of eligible ex-servicemen and that, despite their ex-service component, they could hardly accurately be described as veterans' organisations. Most veterans did not join ultra-loyalist groups. It is likely too that, despite the anxiety of the times, most veterans, and indeed most of the general public, did not feel that civil war or red revolution was imminent. The thesis argues that the RSL depended on the government of the day for the satisfaction of its demands and its existence, regardless of that government's political hue. While it may not have liked a Labor government as much as a conservative one, the RSL was hardly likely to indulge in activities which would put its relationship with that government at risk. This is not to say that the RSL did not contain its share of right-wing zealots, but this thesis suggests that soldiers who felt that the RSL should take a more 'political' as opposed to 'pressure group' role either

⁴⁸ See, for example, Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop*, Fitzroy, Vic., 1988, and Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, Kensington, N.S.W., 1989.

joined other organisations which did satisfy these needs while maintaining their RSL membership, or left the RSL to further these aims, often returning later when the alternative organisations disbanded and the imagined crisis was over.

The thesis does not deal in any significant way with the issue of sectarianism. The main reason for this is that sectarian issues do not figure prominently in South Australian and federal RSL debates in the period 1916-1939. This is not to say that they were never debated. The Tasmanian RSL branch, for example, was ready in 1919 to fight against Irish secession⁴⁹, and in general the RSL, while claiming not to be anti-Catholic, was always ready to attack 'disloyal utterances'.⁵⁰ But the sectarian issue does not seem to attract the driving or constant attention that other issues did. This suggests either that historical emphasis on post first world war Australian society as being divided between middle class Protestants and working class Irish Catholics⁵¹ is exaggerated, or that the RSL

⁴⁹ Lake, *A Divided Society*, 191-2.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 April 1920, 4, 15 November 1920, 6, and *Daily Mail*, 5 August 1921.

⁵¹ See, for example, Kevin Seggie, 'Right Wing Extremism in Australia, 1919-1933', MA

found other issues in the period more pressing.

To sum up, this is a thesis about change. Bill Gammage wrote recently that the 'large question' in his book *The Broken Years* was not what Anzacs experienced during the first world war, but how that experience contributed 'to an explanation of why nineteenth and twentieth-century Australia are different'.⁵² As a product of the first world war, and as an organisation which became recognised as an Australian institution, the RSL tells us something about the society and the times which spawned it. In the excitement prior to the March 1983 Australian federal election Barry Jones, commenting on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam dispute in Tasmania, was quoted as saying that confronting the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission was 'like taking on the RSL or arguing about the Pope - some things are sacred'.⁵³ This thesis is not about 'taking on' the RSL, but about aspects of why it was different to live in Australia before the first world war than after it.

thesis, University of New South Wales, 1979, 13.

⁵² Bill Gammage, 'Open and Closed Historiographies', *Australian Historical Studies*, 24:97 (October 1991), 445.

⁵³ *Advertiser*, 3 March 1983.

Chapter 1

Winning the war

On 10 May 1916 returned soldier associations from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia met in Sydney to discuss establishing a national organisation. Each had grown from civilian bodies.¹ These origins had a direct influence on the subsequent development of the RSL. Like the civilian bodies from which its state branches derived, the RSL supported the full and continued prosecution of the war, including conscription. By the end of the conscription campaigns, the RSL was firmly associated with the pro-conscription lobby and the Nationalist Party. While the RSL and its civilian 'win the war' allies both defined 'loyalty' in a very narrow sense, the RSL differed from civilian organisations in that it stressed the paramount importance of war service in that definition.

The first returned soldier associations 'sprung up in 1915 out of the Returned Soldiers' clubrooms provided by public subscription with the help of patriotic

¹ Kristianson, 'The Establishment of the R.S.L.', 19.

organisations'.² Speaking in an interview about these early movements, Michael McKernan has commented that

... many of them, surprisingly enough, grew out of earlier associations, like [the] AIF Fathers' Association [and] these sorts of things, little groups that were formed by people who wanted to have some real identification with the soldiers. Often enough you'd find that the returned soldiers would move into an organisation already in existence and take it over to an extent, or adapt it to their expanded purpose.³

In South Australia the Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA) originated from a patriotic organisation known as the Cheer-Up Society. In November 1914, when the second South Australian contingent was still in camp at Morphettville, W.J. Sowden, an active member of the Australian Natives Association and

² Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 5. Gavin Souter outlines similar origins in *Lion and Kangaroo*, Sydney, 1976, 245. See also Inglis, 'Returned Soldiers in Australia, 1918-1939', 59-60.

³ Michael McKernan, in Phillip Briant (prod. and dir.), *Warriors, Welfare and Eternal Vigilance*, ABC Radio Talks and Documentaries, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1983 (Side 1, 'The Beginnings').

editor of the South Australian *Register*⁴, asked 'Who will form the first Cheer Up Our Boys Society?'⁵ Alexandra Seager, whose husband was an army officer, responded by forming a committee to provide 'comforts' for the men in camp.⁶ By December 1915 the Cheer-Up Society had 300 members in the metropolitan area and an estimated 10,000 members in eighty-six country town branches.⁷ The Cheer-Up Society gave its first welcome home to wounded soldiers at the Exhibition Building on 20 August 1915, and soon these 'special welcomes' at the Cheer-Up Hut became as central to the Society's work as providing refreshments and entertainment to men in camp.⁸

The Cheer-Up Society's social character resembled that of other patriotic organisations of the time. There were strong similarities, for example, between the Cheer-Up Society and the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society. Both the Red Cross and Cheer-Up societies conformed to the

⁴ *Australian Encyclopaedia*, v. viii, Sydney, 1958, 225; Fred Johns, *Who's Who in the Commonwealth of Australia*, Sydney, 1922, 255.

⁵ *Register*, 3 November 1914.

⁶ First Annual Report of the Cheer-Up Society, 26 March 1915 - 31 October 1915, Mortlock Library of South Australiana (hereafter MLSA), SRG 6/8, n.p.

⁷ *ibid.*, n.p.

⁸ *ibid.*, n.p.; F.J. Mills, *Cheer Up*, Adelaide, 1920, 73.

pattern of 'establishment-initiated, middle class organisation[s] of loyal women devoted to the task of providing for the men of the AIF'.⁹ While both organisations depended upon the unceasing efforts of legions of unpaid women, their executive positions were filled by men, a trend McKernan argues 'became the norm during the war years'.¹⁰ Although the provisional committee of the Cheer-Up Society appointed in November 1914 consisted mainly of women, positions of responsibility gradually became occupied by men. At the first quarterly meeting of the Society on 8 February 1915 the female president, E.K. Baker, resigned for health reasons and W.J. (later Sir William) Sowden was unanimously elected to the position.¹¹ Men were returned to most responsible positions after elections in March 1915, and Alexandra Seager was the only woman elected to a twelve-member Board of Management after further voting at the Society's first annual meeting on 10 December 1915.¹² The *Register* was close to the mark when it acknowledged the prime contribution

⁹ Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Sydney, 1984, 70.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 67-68.

¹¹ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 35.

¹² Mills, *Cheer Up*, 10, 108; Robert Thornton, 'Practical Patriots: The Work of the Cheer-Up Society in South Australia 1914-1964', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, n. 13 (1985), 45.

of women to patriotic bodies such as the Cheer-Up Society:

Roughly speaking [it reported], in this State, men have financed patriotic work and women have done it. They have undertaken it gladly, partly for the blessed distraction it gives to their thoughts, and also because they feel that in no other way can they do their share. They responded magnificently to the call of patriotism; they have performed untold work at untold sacrifice.¹³

Less information is available about the Cheer-Up Society's country branches, but some generalisations may be made. More women appear to have occupied positions of leadership in the country branches. Of a sample of ten country branches of the Cheer-Up Society - Aldinga, Burra, Carrow/Port Neill, Gawler, Port Elliot, Murray Bridge, McLaren Flat, Strathalbyn, Tanunda, and Victor Harbor - three had male presidents (two of whom were mayors), six had female presidents, and the president for one was not listed. The secretaries in all ten towns were female.¹⁴

¹³ *Register*, 12 October 1916. Sowden was probably the author.

¹⁴ *R.S.A. Magazine* ('Official Organ of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial

But if women did play a more active role in the leadership of the Cheer-Up country branches, the middle-class composition of the membership was similar to that in Adelaide. Although branches like Tothill's Creek might boast that 'fourteen members were enrolled, which included every lady in this small township',¹⁵ many potential members would have been excluded by the demands fund-raising placed on their purses. In Murray Bridge, for example, members 'promised to pay a small sum monthly to augment the funds', while in Port Elliot 'a very successful farewell social was tendered' to departing servicemen in March 1916 at which 'a silver coin admission was charged'.¹⁶ The twenty-five founding members of the Kadina branch, all women, agreed to subscribe 6d. a month.¹⁷ Women from this socio-economic group were probably involved in a number of patriotic activities throughout the war, something they

League of Australia, S.A. Branch'), June 1916, 8-13. This magazine was published between April 1916 and October 1919, and was issued jointly by the South Australian RSL and the CUS until February 1918. After this date it continued to carry 'Cheer-Up News' but was officially issued by the South Australian RSL only.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, April 1916, 13.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 11, 13.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 10. Single men were asked to subscribe 1/-, perhaps a kind of 'bachelor' tax to remind these men of their status and of the duty in regard to enlistment that such status implied.

shared with their urban counterparts. The Port Pirie branch of the Cheer-Up Society noted in March 1916 that 'there is not much scope in the country branches to entertain the soldiers, but our members have worked energetically in the Red Cross Branch ...'¹⁸

An examination of the Cheer-Up Society's Adelaide executive confirms the middle-class and establishment orientation of the Society's leadership. President W.J. Sowden was editor and part-proprietor of the *Adelaide Register*, strongest representative of the conservative press in South Australia. Sowden had a long association with patriotic and benevolent societies, both before and during the war, and it is probable that he saw his wartime role as a logical extension of that expected of his class in peacetime. He was twice chief-president of the South Australian Board of Directors of the Australian Natives Association, and between 1908 and 1926 was president of the National Library, Museum and Art Gallery in Adelaide. In 1920 he became president of the Adelaide branch of the Royal Society of St George, and he was also the first federal and state president of the Australian Wattle League and the founder and long-serving president of the

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 12.

Prisoners' Aid Society. He was knighted in 1918 and died in October 1943.¹⁹

The vice-presidents of the Cheer-Up Society, George McEwin, F.J. Mills, and H.J. Henderson, came from similar vocational and class backgrounds. McEwin was a prominent Adelaide solicitor of the firm of Glynn, Parsons and McEwin, and Chief of the Caledonian Society.²⁰ F.J. Mills was a journalist on the *Register* and well known for his general writings under the pseudonym of 'Twinkler'. He was also secretary of the South Australian Post, Telegraphic and Telephone Patriotic Fund and an avid worker in the Wattle Day League.²¹ Henderson was secretary of the Adelaide Club.²²

The executive committee had a similar social profile. The committee included South Australian premier Crawford Vaughan, state commandant Colonel A.H. Sandford, and C.E. Owen Smyth, vice-patron of the jingoistic and ultra-loyalist All British League, honorary secretary of the Royal Society of St. George, and a leading figure in the League of the

¹⁹ *Australian Encyclopaedia*, v. viii, 225; Johns, *Who's Who in the Commonwealth of Australia*, 255.

²⁰ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 38; *Critic*, 19 January 1916; *Advertiser*, 28 November 1916.

²¹ Interview with Elva E. Morison (hereafter Morison interview), 22 July 1985; Mills, *Cheer Up* (Sowden's Introduction), 3-4.

²² Morison interview, 22 July 1985.

Empire movement, an organisation specifically geared to the inculcation of the 'correct' patriotic sentiment in schoolchildren.²³

These individuals were middle-class, conservative, and generally Protestant men who whole-heartedly supported the war and maintained a high public profile. Participation in wartime patriotic organisations was expected of members of this group. As with many civilians who were ineligible for war service through age or disability, they strove to gain some feeling of mutuality with sons or younger brothers on active service. Introducing Mills's book on the war work of the Cheer-Up Society, Sowden emphasised the author's 'magnificent performances ... as a war worker, both before and after he tried vainly to pass the medical examination required for active service'.²⁴ Sowden himself told returned soldiers in July 1916 that it was 'fortunate' for the

²³ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 108; All British League Proposal Form, State Records (South Australia) (hereafter SRSA) GRG 24/6/1708 (Premier's Department P163/16); *All British Sentinel*, 1:6 (1 May 1918), 4, and 1:8 (1 July 1918), 14, 18; Trevor Shaefer, 'The Treatment of Germans in South Australia 1914-1924', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1982, 18-21; David Hood, 'Empire Day in South Australia 1905-1914', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1982, 4-17. Owen Smyth's son Trevor, a lieutenant with the 10th Battalion, was killed at Gallipoli on 11 May 1915.

²⁴ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 3.

Prussians that 'he was unable to go to the front, but he would do his bit here by giving whatever possible assistance he could to the boys'.²⁵

Given the sentiments of this leadership, it is not surprising that the Cheer-Up Society was a strong supporter and agent of the recruiting effort. Referring to the comforts provided for soldiers in camp by the Society, Mills thought that:

There is no doubt this treatment of the recruits had a beneficial effect on recruiting. Soldiers would write to the country telling their friends of the good times they were having at the Cheer-Up Society ... with the result that the position was made so attractive that many a hesitant youth was persuaded to take the grand step. More than one military officer has stated that the Cheer-Up Hut was a splendid recruiting sergeant!²⁶

The Cheer-Up Society also helped to organise patriotic carnivals with a recruiting as well as fundraising function. The secretary of the

²⁵ Special General Meeting, 12 July 1916, Minute Book of the South Australian Returned Soldiers' Association, RSL State Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter RSA Minute Book), 42.

²⁶ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 99-101.

Petersburg²⁷ Cheer-Up Society reported in April 1916 that the arrangements for a patriotic carnival on Anzac Day were 'in the hands of the Recruiting Committee, assisted by local patriotic societies'.²⁸ Workers in the Cheer-Up Society were thus able to combine genuine concern for the material and moral welfare of soldiers with the wider aim of stimulating recruiting for a cause they ardently supported.

The Cheer-Up Society never officially advocated conscription. This suggests either that it considered that conscription was a political question and consequently out of bounds for a 'non-political' organisation, or that its membership was divided over the question, or both. Nevertheless, many of its leaders were openly associated with the 'Yes' cause. In October 1916 Liberal leader Sir Joseph Cook visited Adelaide to campaign for the 'Yes' cause. Sowden convened a gathering at the Cheer-Up Hut and introduced Cook by commenting that 'the Cheer-Ups knew no politics, but never lost an opportunity to offer a chance to distinguished visitors to make the acquaintance of our boys on their way to, or after their return from, the

²⁷ The name was changed to Peterborough that year.

²⁸ *R.S.A. Magazine*, April 1916, 12.

front'.²⁹ Sowden's choice of eligible distinguished guests never extended to anti-conscriptionists. Cook was careful in addressing the crowd of soldiers and 'Cheer-Ups' to avoid specific references to his mission, presumably out of respect for the Society's non-political charter, but he found other ways to deliver his message. 'He really could not trust himself', he told the soldiers, 'to express his sentiments towards them, but they might rely upon his solemn undertaking to do everything possible to reinforce them, and to ensure the best conceivable treatment for them on their return from the field of battle'.³⁰

Cheer-Up Society officials would no doubt have nodded approvingly at Sir Joseph's words. Sowden's stance was well known: he strongly advocated conscription through *Register* editorials.³¹ In his official capacity as Chief of the Caledonian Society, McEwin wrote to the *Register* asserting that 'never before ha[d] a free people - part and parcel of an Imperial race - been in a position voluntarily to assume and discharge

²⁹ *Register*, 23 October 1916.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ See, for example, *Register*, 7 September 1916, and Patricia Gibson, 'The Conscription Issue in South Australia, 1916-1917', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 33-34.

a great and noble obligation'. He felt that if 'every elector will only look ahead and beyond ever so little there must be an overwhelming victory for national service'.³² Mills was active in the Rejected Volunteers' Association, a body which suggested that its president and vice-president sit on a provisional conscription committee when the idea for such a committee was first mooted.³³ Surprisingly, the ultra-loyalist All British League, with which Owen Smyth was actively associated, had an early minority of anti-conscriptionists³⁴, but they were quickly ostracised or expelled, and support for conscription became the League's official policy.³⁵ Labor leader and Cheer-Up Society executive committee member Crawford Vaughan was a pro-conscriptionist³⁶, a stand for which he was expelled (with brother and attorney-general J.H. Vaughan) by the United Labor Party Council of South Australia.³⁷

³² *Register*, 28 October 1916.

³³ Mills, *Cheer Up* (Sowden's Introduction), 3-4; C.T. Barnes (hon sec, S.A. Rejected Volunteers' Association) to A.H. Peake (SA Premier), 19 November 1917, SRSA GRG 24/6/1395 ('Conscription Referendum Campaign, 1917').

³⁴ See, for example, *Register*, 5 October 1916.

³⁵ *Advertiser*, 1 December 1917; *All British Sentinel*, 1:7 (1 June 1918), 21.

³⁶ *Register*, 21 September 1916.

³⁷ *Advertiser*, 4 November 1916.

Through its direct association with the recruiting movement, and its indirect association with the pro-conscription cause, the Cheer-Up Society identified itself with the 'win the war' movement. Support for the war, support for conscription, and above all, Imperial loyalty, characterised what was generally meant by 'conservative' in wartime Australian society.³⁸ Even after romantic illusions about the nobility and heroism of war had long disappeared, conservatives maintained a burning belief in the moral righteousness of their cause.³⁹ The cause was not only perceived as righteous in a temporal framework, but also as having a higher spiritual justification. Owen Smyth's views were typical of this attitude. 'Paris was saved', he wrote in a necessarily short history of the war in 1915, 'but only by the narrowest margin, and, I firmly believe, by the hand of Almighty God'.⁴⁰

³⁸ See, for example, Seggie, 'Right Wing Extremism in Australia, 1919-1933', 117.

³⁹ 'Blazing' moral idealism in times of national emergency is considered by E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, London 1980, as cited in Andrew Moore, '"Send Lawyers, Guns and Money!": A Study of Conservative Para-Military Organisations in New South Wales, 1930-1932, Background and Sequel, 1917-1952', PhD thesis, LaTrobe University, 1982, 43.

⁴⁰ *Souvenir, League of the Empire* (S.A. Branch), Adelaide, 1915, 24.

Such views of loyalty and commitment were not open to compromise. The highly-politicised environment made it difficult for any individual or organisation to remain wholly 'non-political'. From the time that it started to gain momentum in early 1915, the pro-conscription campaign was characterised by a sense of urgency which F.B. Smith attributes to a recognition that, for conscription to be implemented, it was necessary to defeat the 'passive resistance' of a 'moderately prosperous, independent community that was far from the scenes of conflict'.⁴¹ That led to a 'crude' campaign by pro-conscriptionists that 'simplified and brutalized' the issues⁴² and led to an erosion of any middle ground.

Some Cheer-Up Society members recognised relatively early that it would not be possible for the Society to dissociate itself from the controversies of the time. In April 1916 the editor of the *R.S.A. Magazine* wrote that

although the Cheer-Up Society and the Returned Soldiers' Association are both strictly non-political and non-sectarian ... there is only 'the war'

⁴¹ F.B. Smith, *The Conscription Plebiscites in Australia 1916-17*, Melbourne, 1965, 6-7.

⁴² *ibid.*, 8.

and the absolute necessity for us winning it. Those who do not agree with us are our enemies ... we have no use for any party, whatever it may be, which pursues a policy of obstruction or delay.⁴³

In the early stages of the war it may have been possible for individuals opposed to conscription or with Labor sympathies to feel comfortable working in the Cheer-Up Society. Opposition to conscription did not preclude whole-hearted support for the prosecution of the war or the voluntary scheme of recruiting. But individuals with Labor sympathies, or those with doubts about the length of the war and the way it was being managed, or Catholics who felt uneasy about links between the Cheer-Up Society's leadership and sectarian organisations⁴⁴,

⁴³ *R.S.A. Magazine*, April 1916, 5.

⁴⁴ For example, although the editor of the *All British Sentinel*, official publication of the All British League in which Owen Smyth was so active, dismissed criticisms that the paper was in any way sectarian, editorial discretion was often exercised independently of editorial policy. For evidence of underlying anti-Catholicism, see, for example, *All British Sentinel*, 1:6 (1 May 1918), 12 ('The German-Sinn Fein League'); 1:8 (1 July 1918), 5 ('"Some" Bloody Oaths' - an attack on the Jesuits); 1:9 (1 August 1918), 21, 24 ('Roman Catholics and the War' and 'Roman Hierarchy and Civil Power'); 2:10 (2 September 1918), 7, 8, 12 ('The Pope's Thanks', 'The Jesuits' and 'The Repatriation Department'); 2:11 (1 October 1918), 7 ('Roman Catholics and Politics').

must have found their position within an organisation whose leadership was dominated by Protestant 'win-the-war' establishment figures increasingly difficult.

This leadership was instrumental in the early history of the Returned Soldiers' Association of South Australia. At the first meeting of the Returned Soldiers' Association at the Cheer-Up Hut on 8 December 1915, W.J. Sowden was elected president and George McEwin vice-president.⁴⁵ Alexandra Seager later became a vice-president, and honorary secretary G. Fairbairn was probably also involved with the Cheer-Up Society.⁴⁶ These civilians, according to the historian of the Cheer-Up Society,

... stated from the outset that they would not take the positions excepting on the distinct understanding that they would not hold them after the return of some members of the Forces whom the soldiers considered suitable to succeed them. Meanwhile, on the assurance that at that time no suitable returned soldiers were available or willing to act, they would assist in establishing the

⁴⁵ General Meeting, 8 December 1915, RSA Minute Book, 1-2.

⁴⁶ General Meeting, 22 December 1915, *ibid.*, 4-5.

[Returned Soldiers'] Association on a firm basis.⁴⁷

Sowden and McEwin had much to offer the Association. Both had experience in organising and participating in successful benevolent and patriotic organisations, both had shown themselves good friends to soldiers, both had considerable influence in their respective careers of journalism and law, and both were quite willing to associate themselves with a further patriotic and deserving cause.

But the RSA's origins in an existing civilian organisation meant more than an established leadership with proven organisational skills and a plethora of useful contacts with persons of importance and influence in government and business. The RSA was also exposed to a set of values and a direction which influenced its subsequent social character. Indeed, it moved very quickly to affirm the values of its parent body towards conscription and the continued prosecution of the war. At a meeting on 8 February 1916, the RSA resolved that 'this Association be in favour of National Service and that a notice to that effect be put in

⁴⁷ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 109.

the papers'.⁴⁸ In September 1916 representatives from associations in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria met at the first congress of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia and decided unanimously to support the 'Yes' campaign in the forthcoming plebiscite.⁴⁹ The RSL then took an active part in that campaign. It circulated copies of the congress resolution among the leading conservative newspapers, with a commentary which noted that:

... as the vital question of the referendum is now before the people of Australia, the congress of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors [sic] recently held at Brisbane believes the knowledge of the existence of this Federation of Returned Soldiers' Associations throughout Australia and its objects in securing the interest and welfare of all who are and may be engaged in fighting for their country, will give confidence to the voter and materially assist him to say 'Yes' in the referendum.⁵⁰

The South Australian RSL, as it had then become, was also active in the 1917 campaign.

⁴⁸ General Meeting, 8 February 1916, RSA Minute Book, 19.

⁴⁹ *Advertiser*, 25 September 1916.

⁵⁰ *Critic*, 4 October 1916.

President Arthur Blackburn played a prominent and vocal role in a November 1917 meeting which established a pro-conscription committee comprising himself, state premier A.H. Peake, lord mayor I. Isaacs, various representatives of the current government ministry (a Liberal-National coalition), and the presidents of the Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Manufacturers, and the Farmers and Settlers' Association.⁵¹ The state RSL partly organised and participated in a 19 December 1917 'Monster Procession' through the streets of Adelaide in support 'of the Government proposals'. Fellow-marchers included members of the Naval Band, the League of Loyal Women, the Red Cross Society, the Cheer-Up Society, and 'relatives and friends of the men at the Front'.⁵² Adelaide business firms such as Miller Anderson and Elder Smith & Co. donated advertising space to the RSL to assist its 'Yes' campaign.⁵³ The *Advertiser* encapsulated the RSL's support for conscription and RSL ties with the official 'Yes' campaign when it noted that:

⁵¹ *Register*, 16 November 1917, in SRSA GRG 24/6/1395 (Premier's Department P293/17).

⁵² *Advertiser*, 17 December 1917.

⁵³ See, for example, *Advertiser*, 18 December 1917.

... the returned soldiers [i.e., of the state RSL] have made the Yes campaign their own special concern ... They have their own office in the block occupied by the Yes Reinforcements Referendum Committee, and have traversed the State, making an appeal for help for the Anzacs.⁵⁴

Through its activities at both plebiscites, the South Australian RSL allied itself with people such as the South Australian Governor Sir Henry Galway, who said in November 1916 that 'I must confess I was bitterly disappointed at the result of the referendum'⁵⁵; with members of the military hierarchy such as Brigadier-General Forsyth who, unveiling a Roll of Honour at St Andrews Church at Walkerville, 'spoke in commendation of the men who had said Yes without the pressure of any referendum'⁵⁶; with the Chamber of Commerce Council which resolved to 'entreat' every member to 'use his best efforts to secure a 'Yes' vote at the coming referendum'⁵⁷; and with the president of the Chamber of Manufacturers who argued that his reason for supporting a 'Yes' vote was because

⁵⁴ *Advertiser*, 14 December 1917.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 1 December 1916.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 3 December 1917.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

... conscription places upon all affected equal responsibilities, and is therefore just and equitable. It is scientific, and is the only method which can secure the conservation of those industries which the national welfare demands should be conserved, and the development of new industries which will enable Australia to take her full share in assisting the Empire to successfully emerge from this horrible war.⁵⁸

In the lead up to the October 1916 conscription plebiscite, the RSL and leading conservatives argued that soldiers formed a cohesive group which wholeheartedly supported 'Yes'. Civilian conservatives believed that loyalty was synonymous with support for conscription, and that enlistment was synonymous with loyalty; soldiers would, therefore, support conscription. In September 1916 the *South Australian Register* predicted that 'practically every soldier vote will be a vote for compulsion'.⁵⁹ This suggestion was also extended to the dead. 'It might even be argued', said the *Register*, 'that every man who has fallen in the struggle should be counted as having voted for national service, on the ground that the fact of his having

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 18 December 1917.

⁵⁹ *Register*, 7 September 1916.

sacrificed his life may be taken as proof that he wished to have the war carried on by all means'.⁶⁰

RSL leaders believed that soldiers would vote 'Yes' not only because they were loyal, as demonstrated by their enlistment, but because their war service gave them special knowledge and an exclusive right to demand conscription. The original motion of the RSL's Brisbane congress had been that an affirmative vote be recorded without ballot 'for every person who has left the Commonwealth on active service in this war and has not yet returned'.⁶¹ RSL leaders argued further that anti-conscriptionists had no right to comment on the issue because they had not been 'over there', something which was also true, of course, of the RSL's civilian allies. 'The anti-conscriptionists know nothing about the war', said RSA member Sergeant-Major D. Urquhart in October 1916. 'Could anyone name an "anti" who had been to the front?'⁶²

Both RSL figures and civilian pro-conscriptionists would have been encouraged by reports of returned soldiers and new

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Congress, 11 September 1916, 18, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), MS6609/11.

⁶² *Register*, 21 October 1916.

enlistments breaking up anti-conscription meetings.⁶³ But there were also disturbing reports of soldiers participating in anti-conscription activities which threatened to undermine the RSL's claim to argue for a 'Yes' vote on behalf of all soldiers, both serving and returned. In October 1916 South Australian Chief Secretary A.W. Styles admitted that 'it had been said that a large number of returned soldiers had no intention of voting Yes'⁶⁴, and when that same month a returned soldier interrupted a pro-conscription meeting by shouting his opposition to conscription, even the pro-conscription *Register* acknowledged that 'several members of the audience showed interest in what he had to say'.⁶⁵

RSL and civilian conservatives believed that soldiers overseas would support conscription, and that their vote would be vitally important 'in producing a large "Yes" vote in Australia'.⁶⁶ When early counting in Australia indicated that conscription might be rejected, conservatives hoped that the

⁶³ L.C. Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription in Australia* (first published 1935, this edition 1968), Melbourne, 137.

⁶⁴ *Critic*, 4 October 1916.

⁶⁵ *Register*, 21 October 1916.

⁶⁶ Frank Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, Melbourne, 1983, 115.

figures from overseas would save the cause. 'My belief is that the votes of the Australian soldiers will wipe the "No" majority out', said lawyer, ardent Imperialist nationalist, vigorous war campaigner and former senator Sir Josiah Symon⁶⁷ in a statement combining optimism and pessimism:

I don't think the present advantage of our opponents will be maintained, but if so, well, the glorious sun of Anzac will have suffered an eclipse ... I have great faith that the Australian soldiers abroad will give a big majority for 'Yes', and again retrieve the honour of Australia as they did at Gallipoli and Pozières.⁶⁸

Prime Minister Hughes had kept the soldiers' vote distinct to use as a propaganda point, but this strategy backfired, as with so much of Hughes' handling of the 1916 plebiscite.⁶⁹ Counting revealed a majority of only 13,500 for 'Yes', with over 58,000 negative votes.⁷⁰ This was

⁶⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 156-157.

⁶⁸ *Register*, 30 October 1916.

⁶⁹ Smith, *The Conscription Plebiscites*, 11.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 11. Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War*, Sydney, 1936, 352, gives the figures as about 72,000 affirmative and about 59,000 negative votes.

nowhere near the overwhelming 'Yes' majority conservatives had predicted and certainly not enough to sway the overall result in Australia.

Worse still from the RSL's perspective were the unofficial reports which began to circulate that soldiers at the front had actually resoundingly rejected conscription.⁷¹ Ernest Scott has referred to a suggestion - 'without proof' - that 'the majority of "yes" votes had been due to the votes of soldiers in the overseas camps or in transports being favourable to conscription'.⁷² Censorship prevented the exact breakdown of voting among soldiers being made public.⁷³ On 3 November 1916 the Federal Executive Council issued a War Precautions Regulation which provided that 'no person shall publicly announce, publish, or exhibit any figures or alleged facts concerning the results of the voting of soldiers'.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 172; Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo*, 257.

⁷² Scott, *Australia During the War*, 352.

⁷³ Nor does it appear that such results are extant.

⁷⁴ *Advertiser*, 4 November 1916. The official figures cited by Scott were not released until 27 March 1917 (Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, Melbourne, 1983, 115).

Conservatives and RSL leaders could not dispute the official figures of soldier voting, but they did react vehemently to the reports that front-line soldiers had rejected conscription. To try and minimise the obvious setback to their cause, they at first denied that front-line soldiers had done any such thing. Arthur Blackburn, first South Australian Victoria Cross winner and a future South Australian RSL president, thought that it was

... inexplicable ... how anyone could argue that the Anzacs had returned a No vote at the referendum ... He had talked as he had done with a view to counteracting the influence of the unauthorised statements that the Australian soldiers had turned down the appeal to Australians for further help ...⁷⁵

Others offered explanations. A returned soldier at Murray Bridge thought that 'some of the men ... in the trenches ... had the impression that to vote Yes meant that they would be signing on for a period of five years after the war'.⁷⁶ Others made much of the exclusion from voting of soldiers under

⁷⁵ *Advertiser*, 9 December 1916.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 6 December 1916.

twenty-one years of age, an issue which had been brought up by the Victorian RSL prior to the October 1916 plebiscite.⁷⁷

In the lead-up to the second plebiscite in December 1917, the RSL faced what appeared to be more widespread and vocal opposition by returned soldiers to conscription.⁷⁸ In November 1917 W.H. Mackenzie, secretary of the Returned Soldiers No-Conscription League, protested that Hughes had implied that the only 'dinkum' soldiers were those who had joined the Returned Soldiers' Universal Service Committee. Mackenzie claimed that his organisation had over 5,000 members throughout Australia, 'numbers' of whom had distinguished conduct and military medals, and branches in every state except Victoria. Members had concluded 'from observation abroad', he said, that 'conscription would produce a state of chaos and disunion, and economic ruin, if Australia adopted it'.⁷⁹

The RSL was sufficiently worried by reports of this organisation and of other instances of anti-conscriptionist returned soldiers to campaign hard to counteract them. In November 1917 South Australian RSL vice-president Donald Kerr informed South

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 11 September 1916.

⁷⁸ Lake, *A Divided Society*, 126-7.

⁷⁹ Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription*, 285.

Australian premier Archibald Peake that 'only three dissentient voices' had been raised against a recent state RSL resolution favouring conscription⁸⁰, while that same month president Arthur Blackburn told a public meeting that 'the statement that returned soldiers were against conscription was a deliberate lie, disproved by the fact that his association had carried a resolution in its favour'.⁸¹ In December 1917 South Australian RSL secretary A.R.G. Fearby claimed that 98% of returned men in South Australia belonged to the state branch, of whom 88% supported conscription.⁸² When results of the December 1917 plebiscite became known, the RSL faced a greater disappointment than in 1916. The soldiers' 'Yes' majority had fallen to under 10,000.⁸³

F.B. Smith has pointed to a number of blunders by Hughes (and Minister for Defence George Pearce) during the 1916 and 1917 conscription debates which, he has argued, undermined the cause of the 'Yes' vote. In 1916, Hughes did not check the accuracy of British Army Council statistics which

⁸⁰ Kerr to Peake, 13 November 1917, SRSA GRG 24/6/1395 (Premier's Department P293/17).

⁸¹ *Register*, 16 November 1917, in SRSA GRG 24/6/1395 (Premier's Department P293/17).

⁸² *Advertiser*, 8 December 1917.

⁸³ Smith, *The Conscription Plebiscites*, 17.

demanded 32,500 men immediately and further monthly recruitments of 16,500, a demand which was made against the background of a British threat to redistribute the newly-formed Australian Third Division among British divisions.⁸⁴ He repeated this mistake in 1917, failing to defend his case 'with a simple and reasoned set of figures'.⁸⁵

In 1916, too, Hughes and Pearce used their power under the Defence Acts to require men between 21 and 35 to register for service within Australia, to be fingerprinted, and to enter camp for training if fit.⁸⁶ A further blunder was that, shortly before the 1916 plebiscite, the Executive Council ordered all poll clerks to ask male voters if they were British subjects by birth and whether they had reported to military authorities if they were eligible under the Defence Act. If voters responded 'no' to either, their votes were kept separate for possible later disqualification. This order was withdrawn one day before the poll after three federal ministers resigned in protest against the measure, but the move, according to Smith,

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 9-10.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

had already reinforced public suspicion of authorities.⁸⁷

Smith has argued that the 'No' vote in 1916 was 'as much a negative protest against the authoritarian proclivities of the government as a considered rejection of the moral and national implications of compulsory overseas service'.⁸⁸ When in 1917 Hughes blundered further by dealing heavy-handedly with opposition and permitting censorship to operate clumsily and ineffectively⁸⁹, the anti-conscriptionist message 'once more ... accorded with the moral reservations of the people and their reluctance to concede power to governments'.⁹⁰

Thus voting against conscription did not necessarily mean opposition to the war. K.S. Inglis has warned that the 'radical legend', which assumes a simple class division between the 'workers' and those who supported the continuation of the war,

... does not make clear that many who voted against conscription believed whole-heartedly that the war was just. Most of the soldiers in France voted No. Interpreters differ about why; but nobody has offered any

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 17.

evidence that they lacked confidence in the cause for which they had volunteered to fight.⁹¹

Clearly the fissures through society were not straight. Most chambers of commerce urged the introduction of conscription⁹², yet other businessmen, in common with trade unions, pledged funds to the anti-conscriptionist movement.⁹³ There is no simple connection between political allegiances or representation and voting on conscription. Five months after the October 1916 plebiscite the coalition of National Labor and Liberal parties won an overwhelming victory at the polls. According to Smith 'in farming, lower middle class and mining electorates in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland where "No" had polled well five months earlier, and was to poll well again, the Nationalists now received solid support', something he interprets as indicating that the people wanted the government to continue the war effort 'provided that there was no conscription'.⁹⁴ Victoria, where five out of

⁹¹ K.S. Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition', *Meanjin*, 24:1 (March 1965), 36.

⁹² Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription*, 134.

⁹³ Smith, *The Conscription Plebiscites*, 11.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 15. After the October 1916 plebiscite Hughes had pledged that

six Labor senators opposed conscription, voted "Yes" in 1916, whereas New South Wales and South Australia, where state parliamentary Labor leaders were generally for conscription, voted "No".⁹⁵

For pro-conscriptionist conservatives, however, there was no ambiguity: support for the war self-evidently meant support for conscription. Not to support it was not simply a difference of opinion about how the war should be conducted: it smacked of disloyalty. Such conservatives could not see that it was possible to be both an Imperial loyalist and an anti-conscriptionist, choosing instead to view all anti-conscriptionists as part of a monolithic and 'conspiratorial network to defeat the war effort and succour the enemy'.⁹⁶

By the end of 1917 it seemed that the RSL had, through its support for conscription, affirmed the values of its

conscription for overseas service would not be introduced without a further plebiscite.⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 18. It should also be noted that, while opposition to conscription did not necessarily mean opposition to the war, the rejection of conscription in October 1916 encouraged one faction of the Labor Party to agitate for a return to the Party's agenda of social reform and 'to withdraw such lukewarm support as they had hitherto accorded to voluntary recruitment' (*ibid.*, 13).

⁹⁶ Raymond Evans, '"Some Furious Outbursts of Riot": Returned Soldiers and Queensland's "Red Flag" Disturbances, 1918-1919', *War and Society*, 3:2 (September 1985), 77.

civilian precursors and allied itself with the conservative cause. RSL and civilian conscriptionists both defined 'loyalty' in a narrow way in which support for conscription was a central and essential tenet, and both believed that serving and returned soldiers, as demonstrated 'loyalists', would support conscription. When it appeared that a considerable number did not, neither could understand that while the majority of soldiers undoubtedly believed in the cause for which they were fighting, they were divided - as were civilians - over whether conscription was an appropriate way of conducting the war. The RSL was also to find that, in areas where loyalty was not an issue and soldiers' rights and privileges were, the RSL's character as an ex-service organisation led to its taking a different path from its pro-conscription allies.

Chapter 2

Breaking ranks

Although the RSL placed itself squarely in the camp which pledged total support for the war and conscription, it was also concerned with repatriation. In particular, the RSL evolved a significantly different attitude to the traditional function of benevolent and charitable organisations, the debt owed to returned soldiers by the state, and the extent to which the state was morally obliged to concern itself with repatriation and the future welfare of its citizen-soldiers. Loyalist patriotic bodies such as the Cheer-Up Society were led by citizens who had been pre-eminent in the field of social welfare before the war, and who believed that private benevolence was the most appropriate means by which returned soldiers should be re-settled in civilian life. The RSL argued that new circumstances warranted new approaches, and opposed any repatriation system which was not entirely under the aegis of the state. This was also indicative of a generational change, a clash between the outlooks of those who adhered to the values

of the pre-1914 world, and those whose values were shaped by their war experience.

After the outbreak of war in August 1914, Australians formed and joined numerous patriotic bodies with wide-ranging purposes and activities, such as to raise relief funds for Belgian refugees, to provide entertainment and comforts for soldiers in camp and financial help for their dependants, and to supply military equipment such as motor ambulances. Many of these funds soon ran into trouble. A lack of coordination between the different groups limited their fund-raising efficiency. Their goals sometimes lacked clear definition and their administration was often haphazard and occasionally negligent or criminal.¹

In late 1914 the mayors of Australian capital cities established a Lord Mayors' Fund to raise money to assist the dependants of servicemen and - it was hoped - to co-ordinate the fundraising appeals of the various voluntary organisations.² Because of

¹ D.I. McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund: An Experiment in Social Legislation', 113-115, in Jill Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives, 1901-1975*, Melbourne, 1976; L.J. Pryor, 'Origins of Australia's Repatriation Policy, 1914-1920', MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1932, 6, 42.

² McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 115.

the Fund's semi-official status and the large sums of money involved, and because it was supposed to act both as a model for and on behalf of some of the other patriotic funds, the state governments took a keen interest in its administration. They were particularly concerned that the Fund should be seen by the public as a model of tight administration. The South Australian government's attitude, for example, was clearly stated by premier Crawford Vaughan in September 1915:

The Government have not shown any desire to interfere with the fund, or to have it administered by a public department. But we have sought to make the Public Trustee the man who should be treasurer of the fund, leaving the committee to deal with the distribution as they think fit. We are, however, not disposed to allow the expenditure of this money to be carried out by a few individuals, who are seeking to build up a big department outside, which we think is not desirable in the public interest or in the interests of the fund.³

When Vaughan appointed government representatives to the South Australian

³ *South Australian Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter *SAPD*), 21 September 1915, 951.

Fund's committee, he justified it by arguing that 'we have got to safeguard the community against the expenditure of public money in lavish administration when it can be done cheaply, and the whole tendency today is towards lavish administration'.⁴

Despite some misgivings, the South Australian Liberal opposition under Archibald Peake realised that some control over the various patriotic funds was necessary.⁵ When the Adelaide Lord Mayor's Fund added to its committee without consulting the government, both Vaughan and Peake questioned the legality of the action, and Vaughan said that 'the whole matter does not show that amount of openness which ought to be displayed in dealing with a national question of this character'.⁶ Although the opposition was quick to accuse the government of political bias in its choice of appointees for the Fund's committee, it did not disagree with the principle that such representatives were needed to safeguard the public against the tendency towards the 'lavish administration' feared by Vaughan.⁷

⁴ *ibid.*, 952.

⁵ *ibid.*, 950-951.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

While the state governments flirted with controlling the smaller patriotic funds through the Lord Mayors' Fund, moves were afoot federally to oversee other aspects of Australia's war effort. Shortly after the outbreak of war, the federal government established an all-party body called the Federal War Committee headed by former prime minister J.C. Watson. In August 1915 this committee recommended that the government establish a system of state war councils.⁸ Comprising businessmen, military officers, and politicians of various political persuasions, each state war council was responsible for a diverse range of tasks including recruiting, assisting and advising dependants of deceased servicemen, training the partially disabled, finding employment for returned soldiers, and raising and administering funds.⁹ But because the state war councils lacked statutory authority and could only make recommendations, they were unable to control patriotic funds as intended.¹⁰ The states hesitated to legislate

⁸ J.C. Watson, 'Employment of Returned Soldiers: Recommendations of Federal Parliamentary War Committee', 12 August 1915, SRSA GRG 24/6/1166.

⁹ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 116; Watson to Vaughan, 20 September 1915, SRSA GRG 24/6/1166.

¹⁰ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 117.

for control because they felt that they could be liable for outstanding debts if the funds failed, and they insisted that legislation was the responsibility of the federal government.¹¹ For its part, the federal government argued that it had discharged its obligations through the War Pensions Act, and avoided the issue by using the time-honoured excuse of constitutional limitations.¹² The Lord Mayors' Fund too, while singularly successful in raising large sums of money, proved unable to exercise that close control over the various patriotic funds which had been one of the main reasons for its establishment.¹³

By mid 1916 it was clear that the failure of the Lord Mayors' Fund and the state war councils was undermining public confidence in the various patriotic funds. In August 1916 the South Australian government, following the lead of New Zealand, Western Australia and Queensland, introduced legislation in the House of Assembly to enable the state war council to exercise effective control over patriotic funds with minimum government interference.¹⁴ The South

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, 115.

¹⁴ *SAPD*, 30 August 1916, 1105.

Australian War Funds Regulation Act, like its interstate counterparts, provided for 'powers and duties without reference to any general federal scheme'.¹⁵ The state war council became a body corporate and controlled all war funds and collections. The council's authority was needed before any collection or appeal for a war fund could be made, although general appeals made at public meetings were exempt. Money in a war fund could only be transferred to another fund with the approval of both Houses of Parliament. Trustees of war funds not part of the council nor directly controlled by it were required to submit to it written statements 'setting forth certain specified particulars as to the fund', and the Commissioner of Audit could inspect and audit accounts and other documents relating to any fund.¹⁶

Controlling war funds could not overcome another problem. The voluntary organisations had been established to assist those on the way to the war or needy dependants at a time when few could have foreseen the special problems arising when disabled men returned from the war unable to resume their former

¹⁵ Pryor, 'Origins of Australia's Repatriation Policy, 1914-1920', 39, 42.

¹⁶ SAPD, 27 September 1916, 1491-1492.

occupations.¹⁷ In June 1916 a *Register* correspondent noted that, 'The general public are very willing to endeavour to alleviate the temporary hardships of our fighting men through valuable and well-proved organisations, but to set about raising the millions sterling requisite to repatriate thousands of men by voluntary effort is absurd'.¹⁸ J.C. Watson told state premiers:

Press reports and letters received indicate that the question of providing employment for returned men is engaging public attention in various directions. There is, however, grave danger that a number of separately controlled organisations might spring up, and that confusion, inefficiency, and overlapping may result. The responsibility for providing suitable employment for our men at the conclusion of their service to the Empire is a matter for the nation, and it will be necessary to impress on the public generally, to the fullest possible extent, a sense of its obligations.¹⁹

¹⁷ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 113.

¹⁸ *Register*, 20 June 1916.

¹⁹ Watson, 'Employment of Returned Soldiers', SRSA GRG 24/6/1166.

In some quarters there was stiff resistance to the idea that the Commonwealth should be responsible for every facet of repatriation, including from among members of Watson's Parliamentary War Committee.²⁰ He was forced to make a number of concessions to placate those who believed that private charitable organisations had a role to play in repatriation. Thus his scheme of state war councils combined private and public structures and functions. Each council had a number of sub-committees which dealt with specific areas, and each sub-committee comprised individuals 'whose skills or background was [sic] particularly suited to that particular area'.²¹ The councils operated under the direction of the Parliamentary War Committee, and were assisted by local committees formed in each town in each state.²²

Similarly, the system which the government evolved to settle soldiers on the land was a mixture of government and private administration. In February 1916 a number of state and federal representatives attended a conference in Melbourne to discuss soldier

²⁰ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 113.

²¹ Watson to Vaughan, 20 September 1915, SRSA GRG 24/6/1166.

²² *ibid.*

settlement. The states were prepared to provide land but insisted that the federal government bear all other costs. The federal government would not agree to such a scheme. Eventually the representatives agreed to establish a repatriation fund and to raise money on behalf of the federal and state governments through public appeal. All soldiers were to be eligible for assistance, not only those who were incapacitated.²³ In South Australia the repatriation fund was managed by a sub-committee comprising state representatives of the federal board of trustees.²⁴ This honorary board administered the repatriation fund until the law was changed in April 1918.²⁵

The RSL opposed the hybrid nature of this system. South Australian RSL member Dr Charles Duguid succinctly summarised the League's attitude in July 1918 when he wrote that the RSL was determined that 'the dependants of fallen comrades be properly looked after and catered for by the official representation of the country for which they laid down their lives, viz. the Federal

²³ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 118-119.

²⁴ *SAPD*, 12 September 1916, 1192.

²⁵ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 118-119.

Government'.²⁶ Instead of combined private and government instrumentalities, the RSL wanted a system combining government and RSL representatives. Representatives at the RSL's first national congress in September 1916 called for the establishment of permanent repatriation boards in each state and a federal trust fund controlled by the Treasurer through which the state repatriation boards could draw funds.²⁷ The RSL also wanted to be represented on these state boards. Of a total of five members and a secretary, it suggested, two should be nominees of the state government, two the nominees of the state RSL branch, and the remaining member and the secretary nominees of the federal government, the latter a returned soldier. It also complained about the appointment of public figures to the honorary board of trustees.²⁸

The federal minister for repatriation, E.D. Millen, defended the government's scheme when he met RSL Central Council representatives in September 1917. Millen argued that 'the way to get public sentiment behind the [repatriation fund] is to show the people that their money is being carefully

²⁶ *Returned Soldier*, 10 July 1918, 5.

²⁷ *Advertiser*, 25 September 1916.

²⁸ *ibid.*

looked after by men having the public interest at heart'.²⁹ He reminded them that Australia was the only country in the world in which the government was taking such an active role in repatriation beyond the care of the disabled. 'Britain and France are doing a lot for crippled men, but not for the sound man', he said. 'Canada is doing the same thing, and also doing something to get the men on the land, but the latter is mostly in the hands of private companies, not the Government'.³⁰ Victorian representative J. McKenzie's comment typified the RSL's attitude. 'When soldiers apply for relief', he told Millen, 'they are often referred to Charity Societies such as the Ladies Benevolent Society'. 'Soldiers take strong exception to being dealt with by charity organisations', he continued. 'They have done national service and should be dealt with in a national manner, and not handed over to charity organisations'.³¹

Millen refused the RSL's requests to be represented on federal and state repatriation bodies, arguing that a board of which half the members were returned soldiers would not

²⁹ Central Council, 5 September 1917, 18, Central Council Minutes.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 13.

³¹ *ibid.*

be fair to other sections of the community.³² In this stance, Millen represented 'conservative' opinion which, while recognising that war had brought new circumstances which called for new approaches, sought to minimise government control where possible and, where some government appointees were necessary, to fill these not with returned soldiers but with individuals with prewar experience in administering benevolent societies. To counter the view among veterans' organisations that only soldiers could understand soldiers' problems and needs and deal effectively with them, these conservatives argued that returned soldiers lacked the experience to accept responsibility for their own welfare. In September 1916 the South Australian Minister of Industry told parliament that, while he agreed that returned soldiers deserved all the work they could possibly be given, the fact of the matter was that

there are some men specially suited for controlling [charitable] funds, and organising special demonstrations. It is not easy to get a returned soldier with organising

³² *ibid.*, 18.

abilities without making a thorough trial.³³

The RSL, which had proven itself 'conservative' in matters of loyalty, was not when it came to safeguarding its interests in the field of repatriation. This was most evident in the statements of federal RSL president W.K. Bolton. Colonel in the AIF, Nationalist Senator, and ardent pro-conscriptionist, Bolton had impeccable credentials as a conservative loyalist. He was born in Cheshire, England, in 1860, the son of a corn-dealer, and migrated with his parents in 1868 to Victoria, where his father became a storekeeper. After serving as an apprentice carpenter, Bolton went to Melbourne and then, in 1879, to Sydney where he studied architecture. From 1890 he was inspector of works in the Victorian Public Works Department, employed in the Bendigo and Ballarat Districts.³⁴

By the time he enlisted in the AIF on 19 August 1914, Bolton had had extensive military experience. He joined the Southern Rifles in 1878, and in 1891 was commissioned lieutenant in the 3rd Battalion, Victoria. In

³³ *SAPD*, 12 September 1916, 1191.

³⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 337.

1903 he became major in the 7th Australian Infantry Regiment, was promoted lieutenant-colonel in 1910, and in 1912 took command of the 70th regiment. After war broke out, he briefly commanded Queenscliff Fort before mobilising the 8th Battalion in Melbourne and embarking with it for Egypt on 19 October. Present at the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, he briefly commanded the 2nd Infantry Brigade, but was invalided from Gallipoli late in May due to his age and 'collapsing health' and returned to Australia.³⁵ Bean described him as a 'soft-hearted commander very solicitous for his men'.³⁶ From August 1915 he commanded successively the Ballarat Training Depot and the Defended Ports of Victoria. He retired as honorary brigadier general in 1920.³⁷

Bolton was a founding member of the RSL and became its first national president on 3 June 1916. He also became a member of the newly-formed National Party's interstate executive committee which met in January 1917 to prepare its political platform.³⁸ He was elected to the Senate on 5 May 1917, a move unanimously endorsed by the RSL's central

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *Advertiser*, 10 January 1917.

council.³⁹ He was re-elected to the Senate in December 1919, 'after a campaign embittered by accusations that he had been cowardly at Gallipoli', charges which he successfully refuted.⁴⁰ After his defeat as RSL president by G.J.C. Dyett in July 1919, he was less prominent in politics and was defeated at the 1922 elections. He contested unsuccessfully the federal seat of Henty in 1929. He died in 1941.⁴¹

In 1917 Bolton's role as RSL president and his attitude as a returned soldier towards matters of government responsibility for the welfare of returned soldiers meant that he was not a conservative of the kind who favoured a hybrid system of repatriation with civilians of his own ilk amply represented to the exclusion of veterans. Bolton attacked the power the July 1917 Repatriation Bill vested in local committees to raise and distribute local funds, arguing that the government was thus shirking full responsibility for repatriation. He also felt that, because of differences in the wealth of both individuals and areas, certain communities would be able to provide more

³⁹ Central Council minutes, 31 May 1917, 3.

⁴⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 338.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

than others. This, he believed, was 'inconsistent with equity of service and sacrifice':

This is not the idea of the League. No matter where a man may live he ought to be able to demand from the Government equal treatment.⁴²

The clash between the RSL and conservatives over state and returned soldier involvement in repatriation is clearly seen in dealings between the South Australian RSL on the one hand and the South Australian Soldiers' Fund (SASF) and the Cheer-Up Society on the other. In July 1915 the South Australian government, as part of its attempt to integrate private charity and government responsibility, contributed £20,000 towards the SASF on condition that the fund was administered by a committee comprising the executive of the Adelaide Lord Mayors' Fund, and certain government nominees representing about one third of the committee.⁴³ This

⁴² Central Council, 5 September 1917, 7-8, Central Council Minutes. For expression of the same sentiments at state level see, for example, *Returned Soldier*, 10 July 1918, 6.

⁴³ Minutes of the South Australian Soldiers' Fund, Mortlock Library of South Australia (MLSA) SRG 79 (hereafter SASF Minutes), 2 July 1915, 27 August 1915; *SAPD*, 20 July 1915, 119-120, 14 September 1915, 843, 5 October 1916, 1679. Popularly known as the Wounded Soldiers Fund, the SASF had raised

grant immediately established the SASF as the largest and most powerful patriotic fund in the state.⁴⁴ Despite government-appointed representatives, the SASF committee remained, for all intents and purposes, a private body which exercised control independently of the state which had been instrumental in assuring its pre-eminent position. The SASF strenuously and successfully resisted any attempts at further government intervention.⁴⁵

The South Australian RSL found this deeply offensive, objecting to a 'charity' organisation assisting soldiers or their dependants and assessing applicants' eligibility for assistance, and in January 1917 established a grievance committee to investigate ex-soldiers' and widows' complaints about the fund.⁴⁶ It also denounced SASF secretary H.E. Winterbottom as 'unsympathetic' towards the RSL and its members and made much of the fact that Winterbottom was secretary of the Chamber of

£300,000 by October 1916 (*SAPD*, 5 October 1916, 1678) and £444,672 by September 1917. The next largest fund was the Belgian Relief Fund, with £138,016 in September 1917 (*Advertiser*, 14 December 1917).

⁴⁴ SASF Minutes, 27 August 1915.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *SAPD*, 10 December 1915, 3017.

⁴⁶ Committee Meeting, 10 January 1917, 100, RSA Minute Book.

Manufactures⁴⁷, an organisation it did not like, possibly because it felt that the Chamber's attitude to returned soldiers was reflected in its 1916 annual report which noted that 'the irresponsible life of the soldier appears to create a certain disinclination to settle down in the ordinary avocations of civil life'.⁴⁸ The RSL also criticised Winterbottom for receiving a salary for his 'voluntary' work with the SASF⁴⁹, and for not, although apparently of eligible age, enlisting.⁵⁰ The South Australian RSL complained about the SASF's

⁴⁷ Committee Meeting, 11 April 1917, 146, RSA Minute Book.

⁴⁸ *Advertiser*, 15 November 1916. The RSL probably pressured the Chamber of Manufactures throughout 1917 to affirm the principle of preference to returned soldiers. When the Chamber did in fact resolve that returned soldiers should be given preference as far as possible 'during the continuance of the war', the RSL was not satisfied, and eventually the Chamber deleted the last proviso (*Advertiser*, 12 December 1917).

⁴⁹ Committee Meeting, 11 April 1917, 146, RSA Minute Book. In September 1916 the South Australian Minister for Industry, R.P. Blundell, told parliament that Winterbottom's dual secretaryship of the Chamber of Manufactures and the SASF allowed him 'to carry out the duties with less expense to the fund than if we had a secretary appointed for the work' (*SAPD*, 12 September 1916, 1191).

⁵⁰ Committee Meeting, 11 April 1917, 146, RSA Minute Book. Responding later to criticism of the RSL's position, South Australian RSL president A.S. Blackburn explained that 'the Soldiers' Fund is at present time employing an eligible man who, in 1916, was passed by a doctor as fit for active service, but who steadily declines to enlist' (*Register*, 9 July 1918).

administration to the federal RSL secretary, E.C. Evans, who in turn contacted the Prime Minister's Department. In June 1917 Vaughan received a letter of query from this department, and immediately requested a report from Winterbottom.⁵¹

Winterbottom replied that he was puzzled by the South Australian RSL's attitude. He said that the branch had been given the opportunity to meet a special SASF sub-committee on condition that it forward details of the complaints in advance to allow the committee to obtain the background necessary to fully discuss the cases. This offer had been refused on the grounds 'that the [RSL] was not going to give [its] case away'.⁵² Winterbottom denied that 'most of the Committee are members of the Chamber of Manufactures', an insinuation he described as 'an uncalled [for] reflection on a public institution'. He concluded that the RSL, 'instead of manifesting a desire to help the [SASF] in the very difficult work of assisting the soldier and his dependants', appeared instead to be 'endeavouring to place

⁵¹ Central Council, 31 May 1917, 4, Central Council Minutes; Prime Minister to Vaughan, 18 June 1917, Vaughan to Winterbottom, 29 June 1917, SRSA GRG 24/6/1261 (Premier's Department P159/17).

⁵² Winterbottom to Vaughan, 2 July 1917, SRSA GRG 24/6/1261.

the Administrators of the [SASF] in a false position'.⁵³

By the time Winterbotton became involved with the SASF and the dispute with the RSL, he had been associated with the Chamber of Manufactures for a number of years, and since the outbreak of war had had much experience of fund-raising. He was born in London on 21 September 1879, and migrated to Australia (presumably with his parents) while still at school age. He was educated at Caterers' Church of England Grammar School at Semaphore, South Australia, and thereafter appears to have trained as an accountant. In 1907 he became the secretary of the South Australian Chamber of Manufactures, a position he held for forty years. In 1908 he introduced 'made in Australia' shop window displays to South Australia, and in 1910 organised the South Australian Manufactures Exhibition.⁵⁴

Winterbottom's organisational ability and his knack for raising money was undoubted. He was honorary secretary and organiser of the South Australian Lord

⁵³ Winterbottom to Vaughan, 2 July 1917, SRSA GRG 24/6/1261. Winterbottom did not respond to the RSL's other accusations.

⁵⁴ *Who's Who in the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1950, Herald & Weekly Times Ltd, Melbourne, 1950, 766.

Mayor's Fund which raised £50,000 in 1914. In 1915 he was honorary organiser for the Australia Day appeal which raised £220,000 and led to the establishment of the SASF. The 1916 Australian Day anniversary appeal raised another £120,000, and similar appeals in 1917 and 1918 raised £110,000 and £116,000 respectively. After the war Winterbottom organised the 1920, 1925 and 1930 All Australia Exhibitions in Adelaide as well as the 1936 Adelaide Empire Exhibition. In 1947 he was general manager of the Royal Adelaide exhibition.⁵⁵ These jobs may have been as demanding as his work on the SASF, but almost certainly they were less dangerous; in October 1916, for example, Winterbottom was assaulted by a returned soldier to whom the SASF had denied assistance because the soldier had been discharged from the AIF for 'disciplinary reasons'.⁵⁶

Winterbottom could not understand that the RSL's continuing hostility to the SASF derived not from its inability to grasp the administrative complexities of the Fund and the conditions under which the fund operated, but from its attitudes toward the wider issues of the state's duty towards its

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Report of the Executive Committee, 13 November 1916, 182, SASF Minutes.

citizen-soldiers and its responsibility for their welfare. Winterbottom represented a school of thought which balked at the idea of full government control in any field, not only because of government interference but also because of the spectre of increased taxation and public borrowing.⁵⁷

Conservatives were slow to accept that the changed demands and structures of Australian wartime society made traditional recourse to private methods of benevolence and distribution impractical.

The values of Winterbottom and the SASF, which were the antithesis of the RSL's, were also those of the RSL's 'parent' body, the Cheer-Up Society: Cheer-Up Society stalwarts W.J. Sowden and Alexandra Seager were both involved in the SASF's July 1915 Australia Day committee⁵⁸, and Sowden was later elected to the SASF's Committee of Administrators.⁵⁹ The Cheer-Up Society realised that differences existed between it and the RSL.

⁵⁷ McDonald, 'The Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Fund', 118. In South Australia, Hon. J. Lewis expressed the conservative opposition's attitude very clearly when he noted that the federal government had contributed £250,000 to the Repatriation Fund and that each of the states had similarly promised £22,000: 'that is a very easy matter for them', he complained, 'because they are taking it out of the taxpayers' pockets' (SAPD, 4 October 1916, 1640).

⁵⁸ SASF Minutes, 2 July 1915, 3.

⁵⁹ SASF Minutes, 1 October 1915, 11.

Alexandra Seager, for example, knew that many returned soldiers disliked anything resembling charity, commenting that:

I know that many of the men think it neither desirable, nor desire, that they should be provided with anything free, and therefore the [Cheer-Up] hut has done well to draw up everything on a business-like footing.⁶⁰

But this 'business-like footing' saw no room for any government role. 'As a matter of principle', said W.J. Sowden, the Cheer-Up Society 'declined to accept any assistance from either Federal or State government, but itself financed the whole great enterprise'.⁶¹

In 1918, some time after he had resigned as state RSL president, Sowden sided publicly through the pages of the *Register* with SASF administrators in their feud with the RSL. On 5 July 1918, the South Australian RSL resolved to object to any further SASF appeal for funds, explaining that its policy was that 'all matters relating to pensions and repatriation should be wholly managed by the state and federal governments'. If

⁶⁰ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 128.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 3.

organisations of a 'semi-public nature' were permitted to create funds for pensions or repatriation purposes, it said, it would give the federal government the opportunity to 'neglect its proper duty by the returned men and soldiers' dependants'.⁶² A few days later, the *Register* published the comments of an anonymous 'large contributor to the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' League and, in fact, all patriotic funds' - probably Sowden himself - who objected to the RSL's resolution:

It [the SASF] is a most efficient body of self-sacrificing men of high standing in the community, and of undoubted ability and integrity, and it is nothing less than a scandal to pass such a resolution. Those responsible for the motion suggest that the Government should take the matter over. We have had enough of Government management I should think, and I, as a contributor, would never give a penny to any organisation which was run by the Government.⁶³

The next day Sowden, less anonymously, censured the RSL's resolution in a leader in the *Register*.⁶⁴

⁶² *Register*, 6 July 1918.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 8 July 1918.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 9 July 1918.

Returned Soldier immediately attacked Sowden's position. Referring to Winterbottom's dual secretaryship of the Chamber of Manufactures and the SASF, it accused the *Register* of 'barracking for [the] Chamber of Manufactures crowd controlling the Soldiers' Fund', and continued:

Those members [of the RSL] are not the silly asses the 'Register' wants to make them out ... now that they [returned soldiers] are coming back in sufficient numbers to make their presence felt, they are going to do so, and in a way that will call forth more angry subleaders from the Conservative organ.⁶⁵

Strained relations between Sowden and the RSL were not new. From the time of Sowden's election as RSA president in December 1915 to his resignation in November 1916, Sowden was acutely aware that some members resented his non-combatant status. The sensitivity still existed four years later, when F.J. Mills took great pains in *Cheer Up: A Story of War Work* to stress that Sowden had been elected RSL president, and Seager and McEwin vice-presidents, 'by

⁶⁵ *Returned Soldier*, 10 July 1918, 54.

special request of the returned soldiers'.⁶⁶ In July 1916, some months after the RSL moved to restrict membership to discharged soldiers with overseas service⁶⁷, Sowden repeated that 'should at any time the Association wish to appoint a Returned Officer [sic] as President, he would willingly resign'. McEwin made a similar statement.⁶⁸ In October Sowden and McEwin announced that they intended to resign, and on 10 November did so. The committee accepted both resignations with regret and accorded each a hearty vote of thanks.⁶⁹

The departure of Sowden and McEwin heralded a parting of the ways between the Cheer-Up Society and the RSL, a parting which left some bad feelings. In his history of the Cheer-Up Society, Mills stressed the

⁶⁶ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 109.

⁶⁷ Committee Meeting, 24 February 1916, 22, RSA Minute Book.

⁶⁸ Special General Meeting, 12 July 1916, 42-44, *ibid.* Presumably Sowden did not expect to be replaced by a non-officer.

⁶⁹ Special General Meeting, 10 November 1916, 77-78, *ibid.* Although no record can be found of it, Alexandra Seager probably resigned at the same time. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says that Seager resigned as South Australian RSL vice-president 'in favour of an ex-serviceman' in 1919 (v. 11, 559). That should almost certainly be 1916. South Australian RSL secretary E.G. Fairbairn also resigned in November 1916, but 'to re-enlist' (*Advertiser*, 28 November 1916). If accurate, this indicates, of course, that one member of the first RSL executive was a returned soldier. No other information can be found on Fairbairn.

society's generosity towards the RSL, and he implied that the latter had been more than a little ungrateful. He also hinted that in many instances, referring particularly to the *RSA Magazine*, the society did all the work and the RSL got all the profits.⁷⁰ In 1919 Sowden became involved in a public brawl with the RSL when he criticised it for conducting its affairs in an 'unbusiness-like manner'. *Diggers' Gazette* replied sharply:

When a certain civilian held the presidential office the strictures he now passes might have been applied to himself, for then the affairs of the infant branch of the League were chaotic, and probably the article [by Sowden in the *Register*] complained of was born of a certain vindictiveness animating a man ambitious for honour, who was deprived of the presidency when the rules were drawn up requiring all officers to be returned sailors or soldiers.⁷¹

Diggers' Gazette was probably not far off the mark. Sowden did not reckon with the growing exclusiveness of the RSL, an exclusiveness which was linked both to the belief that returned soldiers differed from

⁷⁰ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 109-110.

⁷¹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 November 1919, 79.

other citizens and were entitled to special treatment from public and government, and to the conviction that returned soldiers were the only ones who could understand and alleviate returned soldiers' problems. Although this was something which soldiers from all belligerent countries felt⁷², it was particularly strong in Australia because of the pivotal place the exploits of the Australian soldier held in the formulation and depiction of national identity. As well, the nature of the conflict meant that national survival was seen as being firmly in the hands of the soldiers at the front; civilians had a peripheral role.⁷³

There was exclusiveness among soldiers too, not just between soldiers and civilians. Although the archetypal Digger of national legend had volunteered for active service, it was not enough that he was willing to face

⁷² See, for example, Ward, *The War Generation*, passim.

⁷³ Serle, in 'The Digger Tradition', 157-158, comments on differences between the first and second world wars, and notes that the 'burdens and dangers' of the second world war 'were borne far more widely in the community'. One way this difference appears to have manifested itself is in community attitudes towards returned soldier preference. In an interview of 17 August 1983, first world war veteran S.H. Watson remarked that, while he was aware of no resentment towards returned soldiers after the first world war over the policy of preference, he was aware of 'considerable' resentment after the second world war.

the rigours of war: he actually had to have done so. As a body of returned soldiers, the RSL believed in the legend of the stoic volunteer and wanted to reinforce it. So it distinguished between soldiers who had seen 'front-line' service and those who had not. This process took place very early in its history. In South Australia, an RSA meeting in January 1916 resolved to allow men who had been discharged from the AIF 'through no fault of their own and had never left Australia' to join as special cases 'if approved by the Committee'.⁷⁴ But the following month RSA membership rules were tightened in line with national moves and membership came to be based specifically on 'active service'.⁷⁵ This was not something unique to the RSL. The Veterans of Foreign Wars organisation in the United States, as its name implied, distinguished between service at 'home' and 'abroad'. The German Stahlhelm association contrasted 'front line' members with 'the rest'.⁷⁶ In Britain, however, most ex-service organisations were open to all ranks with war service from August 1914 to the end of the war, regardless

⁷⁴ Committee Meeting, 26 January 1916, 11, RSA Minute Book.

⁷⁵ Committee meeting, 24 February 1916, 22, *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Wootton, *The Politics of Influence*, 65.

of whether the member had served at home or abroad. The only exception was BLESMA, the British association for blind and limbless soldiers, which did embrace a 'front-line pride and ethos' because its members were 'very conscious of being for the most part battle casualties'.⁷⁷

The RSL remained intransigent on its policy of restrictive membership, despite periodic attempts to broaden eligibility. In May 1918, a committee revising the national constitution recommended that the League no longer appoint honorary members⁷⁸, and in July 1919 a motion to ease membership for criteria to allow men of 'Butler's 500' to join the League was defeated.⁷⁹ In February 1920 the South Australian state council resolved to favour affiliation with similar bodies provided that the RSL's membership eligibility did not have to be broadened. The centrality of the League's active service membership policy was again emphasised later that year when national congress rejected a

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Suggested alterations, additions and amendments of Constitution and General Rules of League by the Revisionary Committee at its recent sitting, in Central Council Minutes, 9 May 1918.

⁷⁹ Butler's 500 (of whom there were not 500) was raised by Lieutenant Colonel C.P. Butler during 1918, but were too late to embark.

proposal to admit soldiers' sons to the RSL.⁸⁰

Sowden was an early victim of the RSL's elitism, an elitism which denied membership to many soldiers and therefore could not possibly include civilians, no matter how distinguished they were or how willing to serve. The RSL's exclusiveness undoubtedly contributed to the subsequent animosity with Sowden and the parting of ways between the League and the Cheer-Up Society, but the Cheer-Up Society practised a kind of elitism too. While it was happy to care for returned soldiers and their dependants, it wanted to do so on its own terms, and certainly not as fellow-leaders. To establish the nature of this elitism, it is necessary to examine in more detail the personalities, backgrounds and beliefs of those leading the Cheer-Up Society and those leading the incipient RSL.

Of the sixteen or so people (the sources vary) comprising the Cheer-Up Society's executive and board of management, biographical material can be found on nine - president W.J. Sowden, vice-presidents George McEwin, F.J. Mills and H.J. Henderson, and board of management members Alexandra Seager, Crawford Vaughan, Colonel A.H. Sandford, C.E.

⁸⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 May 1920, 5.

Owen Smyth, and Benjamin Benny.⁸¹ In most cases, it is possible to establish the profession, background, religion and ages of the individuals.

Cheer-Up Society president Sowden came from a working class background. He was born in 1858, the son of a miner, and worked his way from reporter to editor, establishing a reputation along the way as a satirical political columnist. While editor-in-chief and part proprietor of the *Register* between 1899 and 1922, Sowden 'exerted strong influence on public opinion', an influence which was strongly anti-Socialist and 'consistently anti-Labor'.⁸²

Sowden was a true Anglo-Australian typical of his class and position, advocating Australian achievement and progress both for its own sake and the Empire's sake. The importance of the 'Australian' part of 'Anglo-Australian' should not be overlooked in attempting to understand people like Sowden in the pre-war period. Studies by Serle, Lake and Clark have rightly observed that the first world war strengthened both

⁸¹ 1st Annual Report; Mills, *Cheer Up*, 42. Information cannot be found for E.V. Clark, L.W. Yemm, G.A.W. Alexander, J.W. Jones, E.K. Baker, N.E.M. Eddington, and Gordon E. Sunter.

⁸² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 24.

Australian patriotism and imperial sentiment in conservatives⁸³, but it is well to note that many conservatives already nursed such national feeling before 1914. For them, war did not create Australian patriotism but intensified it. Sowden supported the cause of Empire in the South African and first world wars and held high office in the Adelaide branch of the Royal Society of St George, but also 'argued for Australian-born governors and promoted things Australian', most notably through his work with the Australian Natives' Association of which he was a foundation member.⁸⁴ Appropriately for one who held this outlook, he was the first Australian-born editor to receive an Imperial title, when knighted in 1918.⁸⁵ Sowden was a member of the Adelaide Club⁸⁶, and has been described

⁸³ Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, 90; Lake, *A Divided Society*, 191-192; Clark, 'Tramping the Battlefields', 6.

⁸⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 24. The ANA wished to encourage pride in Australia's achievements, but the achievements were always part of a greater service to Empire, and the spirit of Australian explorers was that embodied by all the heroes of the Empire. The ANA, through essay competitions, wanted children to be familiar with examples of 'what Australians have done for Greater Britain', through such examples as 'Hindmarsh at Trafalgar' and 'Gawler at Waterloo'. (Review of W.J. Sowden, *An Australian Native's Standpoint*, in *TP's Weekly*, 8 November 1912.)

⁸⁵ *Who's Who in Adelaide, South Australia, 1921-22*, Adelaide, 1923 [?], 32.

⁸⁶ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 24.

as one who was outspoken and 'liked the limelight'.⁸⁷ He died in 1943.⁸⁸

Cheer-Up Society vice-president George McEwin was appointed a vice-president of the RSA at its second meeting on 22 December 1915⁸⁹, and probably represented the South Australian association at an informal meeting of state RSAs in Sydney in May 1916 which planned the formation of an Australia-wide body.⁹⁰ McEwin addressed the meeting at which the RSA resolved to support the Nationalist Party, and although the minutes do not record what he said, McEwin almost certainly spoke in favour of that motion.⁹¹ Little else is known of him.

Little too is known of 'Twinkler' - F.J. Mills, a vice-president of the Cheer-Up Society - except that he was one of the first civilian male members of the Cheer-Up Society, joining a few weeks after its formation, and the author of *Cheer Up: A Story of War Work*.⁹² He was the first honorary editor of the *CUS Magazine*, which the Cheer-Up Society later handed to the

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ RSA Minute Book, 4-5.

⁹⁰ RSA Minute Book, 24 May 1916, 33; Kristianson, *Politics of Patriotism*, 5.

⁹¹ RSA Minute Book, 21 March 1917, 135-136.

⁹² *Cheer Up* (Sowden's Introduction), 3-4.

RSA⁹³, and a member of the Rejected Volunteers' Association.⁹⁴

Cheer-Up Society foundation committee member and vice-president H.J. Henderson was an Adelaide architect and secretary. He was appointed secretary of the Adelaide Club around about 1893 and was still so in 1915. At war's end, he was about sixty-two years of age.⁹⁵

Alexandra Seager, one of only two women on the Cheer-Up Society's board of management⁹⁶, was born in 1870, the daughter of a miner and farmer. In 1909 she started a successful city business which supplied governesses and servants to country people, an occupation which her biographer says 'developed her entrepreneurial and organisational ability'.⁹⁷ A prime force behind the formation and successful running of the Cheer-Up Society, Seager was its organiser and secretary, and coordinated its eight country branches and its fundraising. It is estimated that over 200,000 servicemen

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ First Annual Report, 10 December 1915, n.p.; H.J. Gibbney and Ann G. Smith, *A Biographical Register 1788-1939*, 1987, v. 1, 321.

⁹⁶ The other was E.K. Baker, of whom nothing is known.

⁹⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 11, 559.

'enjoyed cheap meals and free entertainment provided by helpers in gleaming, long white uniforms' in the Cheer-Up Hut in Elder Park.⁹⁸ Seager's work was not uncontroversial. In mid-1916, she was publicly criticised for receiving a salary for her work with the Cheer-Up Society. One historian has noted that she 'averaged about twelve hours a day in that Hut, and there was every Sunday too, and her salary was hardly commensurate with that which would be paid to a man in similar circumstances'.⁹⁹

In 1915 Seager suggested that returned soldiers form their own association and became a vice-president of the resulting Returned Soldiers' Association.¹⁰⁰ Her concern for the well-being of soldiers has been described as 'almost moralistic', and many young soldiers saw her as a mother.¹⁰¹ Three sons served in the AIF, one of whom was killed at Gallipoli. After the Cheer-Up Society closed in 1920, Seager returned to her business and later settled with her

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Patsy Adam-Smith, *Australian Women at War*, Melbourne, 1984, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Morison interview; First Annual Report, n.p.

¹⁰¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 11, 559.

husband on Kangaroo Island. She died in 1950.¹⁰²

Cheer-Up Society board member Crawford Vaughan was Labor premier of South Australia when he joined the Society in December 1915.¹⁰³ The son of a civil servant, he was born in 1874, attended Prince Alfred College and, after a short stint on Western Australian goldfields, joined the Crown Lands Department as well as practising some freelance journalism. He was secretary of the Single Tax League of South Australia between 1899 and 1904 and joined the United Labor Party in 1904.¹⁰⁴

Vaughan opposed the British cause during the South African War but unconditionally supported Australia and the Empire's cause during the first world war. In 1916 he announced that he was a conscriptionist and convened the National Referendum Council to promote the 'Yes' campaign in the referendum. For this, he was expelled from the Labor Party, along with most of caucus.¹⁰⁵ Sowden and Vaughan probably worked amicably together, and not just because they had like

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ First Annual Report, 10 December 1915, n.p.

¹⁰⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 313.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

views on conscription; despite Sowden's distaste for the Labor Party, his conservative *Register* had described Vaughan as 'one of the intellectual forces of the House of Assembly', and Vaughan was no socialist firebrand, a moderate from a white-collar background which 'endeared him to many among Adelaide's middle classes'.¹⁰⁶ Vaughan tried to retain the seat of Sturt at the 1918 election by standing as an Independent Nationalist (he was overseas at the time)¹⁰⁷, but was defeated by South Australian RSL president Arthur Blackburn standing as a Nationalist.¹⁰⁸

Charles Edward Owen Smyth, another Cheer-Up Society board member, was sixty-seven when the war ended. Born in Ireland, he settled in South Australia in 1876, where he joined the civil service as a clerk. In 1886 was appointed to head the new Works and Buildings Department.¹⁰⁹ He supervised major Adelaide projects such as the Exhibition Building, the Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia buildings, and the South Australian School of Mines and Industries, whose design

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 314.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, v. 7, 308.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 1.

he influenced despite his lack of professional qualifications.¹¹⁰

Owen Smyth was a controversial figure throughout most of his professional life. He attracted criticism from architects for his methods, and an 1888 civil service commission censured him as vindictive, 'hasty in temper, impulsive and overbearing'. The South Australia parliament also criticised his conduct as department head.¹¹¹ Founder and sometime secretary of the Royal Society of St George where he would have had much to do with Sowden, Owen Smyth was active in the South Australian branches of the League of the Empire and the Navy League.¹¹² Viciously anti-German, Owen Smyth would no doubt have approved of fellow Cheer-Up board member and South Australian premier Crawford Vaughan's 1916 bill to close Lutheran primary schools.¹¹³

Colonel A.H. Sandford served briefly on the Cheer-Up Society's board of management in 1915 and 1916. 'Every inch' a professional soldier, August Henry Sandford was born in England in 1859. He started his military career as a youth in the Hertfordshire

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 1-2.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*, 2.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, 313.

Volunteer Infantry and finished it as a major (honorary colonel) commanding the 3rd Battalion at Rabaul in New Guinea in 1919.¹¹⁴ Sandford's active service during the first world war was limited to his role as commander of the fort of Queenscliff, where he was responsible for the famous first Australian shot of the war, that across the bows of the German steamer *Pfalz* as it tried to leave Port Phillip Bay.¹¹⁵ He attempted unsuccessfully to enlist in the AIF several times, despite his age (he was fifty-five when war broke out). He came to South Australia in May 1915 as military commandant with temporary rank of colonel, where he joined the Cheer-Up Committee.¹¹⁶ That involvement was brief, as Sandford was placed in command of the fortress defences of Port Jackson, Sydney, in April 1916. Sandford died in 1923.¹¹⁷

Board member Benjamin Benny is chiefly remembered now as the husband of (Susan) Grace Benny, one-time president of the South Australian Liberal Union and the first female member of a local government council

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, v. 11, 519.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ First Annual Report, 10 December 1915, n.p.

¹¹⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 11, 519.

(Brighton) in Australia.¹¹⁸ Benjamin was born in South Australia in 1869, the son of a Free Presbyterian minister. He gained an LL.B. in 1891 and married Grace Anderson in 1896.¹¹⁹ Benjamin was a foundation member of the Cheer-Up Society¹²⁰ and Grace became honorary secretary of the Seacliff Cheer-Up Society.¹²¹ Benjamin was a vice-president of the Council of the South Australian Law Society, a Grand Registrar in the Grand Lodge of Freemasons, and a director of the South Australian Caledonian Society.¹²² He was also a pro-conscriptionist, addressing a 'Yes' meeting in Brighton in October 1916.¹²³ He was mayor of Brighton between 1903 and 1905, and a Nationalist senator between 1919 and 1926. In June 1926, five months after retiring from parliament due to ill health, he was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to three years hard labour. After being released from prison, he worked as a book salesman, and died in 1935.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, v. 7, 271.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ First Annual Report, 10 December 1915, n.p.

¹²¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 271.

¹²² Johns' *Who's Who in Australia*, 1922, 21-22.

¹²³ *Register*, 4 October 1916.

¹²⁴ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 271-272.



Little biographical information exists on the early executive and management of the South Australian RSL. This in itself illustrates a difference between the RSL and the Cheer-Up Society. While the board of management of the Cheer-Up Society included many well-known, well-established and well-connected South Australian figures, the RSL's early leadership was, on the whole, composed of ordinary individuals whose qualifications for the job were that they were returned soldiers. Substantial if uneven biographical information does exist on state RSL presidents, and if this is examined for the period 1916 to 1929, enough can be gleaned to draw conclusions about the differences between the RSL and Cheer-Up Society leaderships.

The first returned soldier president of the South Australian RSL after Sowden resigned in November 1916 was Senior Chaplain Colonel J.C. McPhee, Moderator of the Presbyterian Assembly. Born in Victoria in 1875, he was appointed Senior Chaplain for the Presbyterian Church for the first division of the AIF, and served in Egypt and Gallipoli. While on Gallipoli he contracted 'severe fever' and was invalided to

Australia, probably in early 1916.¹²⁵ He became a vice-president of the RSA, and was elected president on 10 November 1916. He lasted two months, resigning on 10 January 1917 for unknown reasons.¹²⁶ If the RSL was looking for a virile, red-blooded soldier of high rank to replace Sowden, McPhee's 'strong, manly style' probably appealed.¹²⁷

McPhee was succeeded by Major J.E. Barrett. Born in Goolwa, South Australia, in 1874, and trained in accountancy, Barrett joined the South Australian Mounted Rifles in 1900, became an Area Officer in 1911, and was promoted major in 1912. He enlisted in the AIF in August 1914 and was put in charge of B Squadron, 3rd Light Horse. He landed at Gallipoli on 11 May 1915 and served at Quinn's Post. He was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel in September¹²⁸ and evacuated in November 1915 with typhoid fever. After returning to Australia in 1916 he became Officer-in-Charge of Training, AIF and Conscription Camps, and was promoted G.S.O.

¹²⁵ *Advertiser*, 9 December 1916.

¹²⁶ 10 November 1916, 78, 10 January 1917, 96-97, RSA Minute Book.

¹²⁷ *Advertiser*, 9 December 1916.

¹²⁸ Central Council Minutes, 31 May 1917, 4, and Mills, *Cheer Up*, 116, refer to Barrett as Major.

that same year.¹²⁹ He also became involved with the Cheer-Up Society.¹³⁰

Barrett had a distinguished career as a senior public servant after his war service, all of it concerned with repatriation. In 1918 he resigned as G.S.O. to become Deputy Comptroller in the South Australian Repatriation Department, and the following year moved to Melbourne to become Victorian Repatriation Department Deputy Comptroller. In 1920 Barrett became Inspector of Administration, Repatriation Headquarters, Melbourne, and in July was appointed to Victoria's first Repatriation Commission for a period of three years. In 1923 he moved again, this time to become New South Wales Deputy Commissioner for Repatriation, a position he held for at least the next seventeen years and during which he was awarded an OBE. Throughout all this he maintained his interest in soldierly pursuits, listing military training and rifle shooting among his recreations.¹³¹

Like McPhee, Barrett's presidency was short, a little under six months. He was succeeded in May 1917 by Colonel Stanley

¹²⁹ *Who's Who in Australia*, Melbourne, 1938, 58.

¹³⁰ Mills, *Cheer Up*, 116.

¹³¹ *Who's Who in Australia*, 1938, 58.

Price Weir.¹³² Price Weir was born in 1866, the son of a carpenter, was educated at Norwood Public School, and joined the South Australian Lands and Survey Department in 1879. Like Barrett, he exhibited an early interest in the military. He enlisted in the Volunteer Military Force at nineteen, was commissioned in the South Australian Militia in 1890 (though appears not to have served in South Africa), and commanded the 19th Infantry Brigade from 1912.¹³³ He was promoted to colonel the following year, and meanwhile had 'steadily advanced in his civil employment'.¹³⁴ In August 1914 he enlisted in the AIF as a lieutenant-colonel and was given command of the 10th Battalion. Weir commanded the battalion at Gallipoli until September 1915, when he fell ill. He rejoined his command in Egypt in March 1916 and commanded the battalion throughout the fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm. He was repatriated to Australia and his AIF appointment terminated on 14 December 1916.¹³⁵ He was a vocal advocate of conscription.¹³⁶

¹³² Central Council Minutes, 31 May 1917, 4.

¹³³ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 438.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ See, for example, *Advertiser*, 23 November 1916, 25 January 1917.

Price Weir was a highly decorated officer. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, was mentioned in dispatches, and was awarded the Russian Order of St Anne (with swords). He retired from the Australian Military Forces in March 1921 as an honorary brigadier general.¹³⁷

Weir became South Australia's first public service commissioner in 1916, something a biographer attributes to 'his repatriation ahead of the bulk of returning servicemen combined with the South Australian government's policy of preference for veterans in its employment'.¹³⁸ He continued 'ineffectually' in that position until 1930.¹³⁹ He was an active member of the Church of Christ¹⁴⁰ and a past Master Brother of the Freemasons.¹⁴¹

Arthur Seaforth Blackburn succeeded Price Weir as South Australian RSL president in late 1917, holding that office until 1921 and again from 1946 to 1949. He was born in South Australia in 1892, the son of an Anglican clergyman who was a member of the Royal Society and 'a great authority on

¹³⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 438.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Advertiser*, 9 December 1916.

beetles'.¹⁴² He attended Pulteney Grammar School and the Collegiate School of St Peter before completing a law degree at the University of Adelaide. He served as an articled clerk in an Adelaide solicitor's office before being admitted to the bar in December 1913.¹⁴³ He enlisted in October 1914 as a private in the 10th Battalion, and was promoted to second lieutenant on Gallipoli.¹⁴⁴

In July 1916, at Pozières, Blackburn became the first South Australian-enlisted soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross. In an hour of 'madness and luck'¹⁴⁵, Blackburn captured over 300 yards of German trench and a number of prisoners in an action which resulted in the deaths of roughly equal numbers of Germans and Australians.¹⁴⁶ The South Australian public was admiring but surprised¹⁴⁷, for Blackburn had not shown any particular interest in the military before

¹⁴² *ibid.*, 12 September 1916.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Notes from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* file, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University (hereafter *ADB* notes).

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Ms Rosemary Wighton (A.S. Blackburn's daughter), 22 March 1986.

¹⁴⁶ Blackburn's citation is in *Advertiser*, 11 September 1916. An account by Colonel Stanley Price Weir, the commanding officer of the 10th Battalion, is in *Advertiser*, 17 November 1916.

¹⁴⁷ *Advertiser*, 12 September 1916.

the war. Described as modest, retiring and 'delicate', and neither athletic nor sporting, his work in the solicitor's office before the war was marked by its ordinariness.¹⁴⁸ Trying to explain how such an apparently unsoldier-like person could earn the Empire's highest military award, his former employer said that 'the life of a soldier seems to have developed remarkable courage and features in his character that possibly were dormant before he went into the trenches', although he did concede that when Blackburn set himself a task 'he was not satisfied until he had done his best to carry it out, although in details I frequently had to remind him of the necessity of being more careful'.¹⁴⁹

Believed to have tuberculosis (he did not: an earlier case of severe pneumonia had left scarring on his lungs¹⁵⁰), Blackburn was invalided to Australia in October 1916 and was rarely out of the public eye from this time until his death in 1960. He spoke in support of conscription in 1916¹⁵¹, and played an active part in both general

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Wighton interview.

¹⁵¹ See, for example, *Advertiser*, 9 December 1916.

recruiting and the 1917 conscription campaigns.¹⁵²

During Blackburn's term as South Australian RSL president between 1917 and 1921, he advocated that the League take an active involvement in politics¹⁵³, suggested that the loyalty of 'German' landowners could be measured by the number of their sons who went to the war¹⁵⁴, travelled to Loxton in South Australia's Riverland after the war to investigate reports of open 'German' disloyalty¹⁵⁵, argued that 'German' landholders should be dispossessed to make land available for soldier settlers¹⁵⁶, and said that 'eligibles' should be barred from dealing with repatriation in any way.¹⁵⁷ He also argued that positions held by returned soldiers in the public service should be made permanent without examination¹⁵⁸ and opposed

¹⁵² See, for example, *Advertiser*, 25 April 1917, 16 November 1917.

¹⁵³ Congress, 27 April 1920, 53-54, NLA MS6609/11; *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 January 1921, 15-17.

¹⁵⁴ *Daily Herald*, 19 July 1919.

¹⁵⁵ *Returned Soldier*, 3 October 1919, 29. A week later, *Returned Soldier* criticised Blackburn for defending (as his solicitor) a 'disloyalist' (*Returned Soldier*, 10 October 1919, 3).

¹⁵⁶ Central Council Minutes, 4 June 1919, 17-19, Congress, 18 July 1919, n.p., NLA MS6609/11, *Daily Herald*, 19 July 1919.

¹⁵⁷ See for example Central Council Minutes, 4 June 1919, 12.

¹⁵⁸ Central Council Minutes, 4 June 1919, 15-16.

extending RSL membership to soldiers who had not seen active service.¹⁵⁹ On another occasion, Blackburn successfully moved that the RSL lobby the federal government to introduce a three week waiting period before the Army reserve was called up in times of peace to prevent it being used to quell industrial trouble.¹⁶⁰ And in August 1919, *Returned Soldier* reported that Blackburn had put Adelaide 'into a flap' by suggesting that brothels be licensed.¹⁶¹

Blackburn felt deeply about the disadvantages soldiers faced upon returning to Australia. His daughter has recalled that he had a strong feeling for the underdog and was 'endlessly patient and endlessly understanding' toward unemployed and drunken returned soldiers who arrived at his door at all hours of the day and night.¹⁶² Blackburn was always aware that he was a returned soldier, and, perhaps like many returned soldiers, that coloured the way he viewed other people. Whenever he met someone or heard of someone of 'eligible age', the

¹⁵⁹ Congress, 27 April 1920, 15, NLA MS 6609/11.

¹⁶⁰ Central Council Minutes, 4 June 1919, 10-11.

¹⁶¹ *Returned Soldier*, 22 August 1919, 6.

¹⁶² Wighton interview.

question was always 'tucked away in the back of his mind, "Did he go to the war?"'.¹⁶³

Between 1918 and 1920, Blackburn was Nationalist member for Sturt in the South Australian House of Assembly. After declining to accept renomination as RSL president for 1921, Blackburn appears not to have played an active role in the RSL for a number of years. However, in 1928, the same year that he succeeded Brigadier-General R.L. Leane to become Adelaide Legacy's second president¹⁶⁴, Blackburn leapt into notoriety as leader of the Essential Services Maintenance Volunteers formed to provide 'necessary protection' for voluntary labour during a national waterside workers' strike.¹⁶⁵ He is also thought to have been involved in a resurrection of this 'special constabulary' in 1931 after the Adelaide Beef Day riots.¹⁶⁶ Between 1933 and 1947, Blackburn was city coroner, where he 'encountered and ignored criticism for refusing to offer public explanation for any decision not to hold an inquest'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Lyons, *Legacy*, 28.

¹⁶⁵ R.N. Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928 to 1932', MA thesis, University of Adelaide, 1973, 21-22.

¹⁶⁶ Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, 216.

¹⁶⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 308.

Blackburn was a militia officer between the wars, and in 1940 was appointed to command the 2/3rd Australian Machine Gun Battalion. He saw action in Syria in 1940 before being transferred to Java to command 'Black Force', where he was captured by the Japanese. He was released in Mukden, Manchuria, in 1945 and was made a C.B.E. (Military) that year.¹⁶⁸

In 1947 Blackburn was appointed conciliation commissioner in the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. The appointment was controversial. Some in the labour movement recalled Blackburn's role in the Essential Services Maintenance Volunteers and asked if justice could be expected from a man who 'once shouldered a gun against the working class'.¹⁶⁹ Other labour leaders demurred and the appointment went ahead, and Blackburn held the position until 1955. Made C.M.G. that year, Blackburn attended a gathering of VC winners in London in 1956. He died suddenly in November 1960.

Blackburn's successor as RSL president in 1921 was Lieutenant Walter Davies Price, MC. He was born in South Australia in 1886, son of Thomas Price who later became Labor

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*

premier of South Australia, and brother of John Lloyd (Jack) Price who held the federal seat of Boothby from 1928 to his death in 1941 and defected from the Labor Party to the United Australia Party in 1931.¹⁷⁰ Walter was a leading cricketer who played for South Australia against Victoria in 1913, an activity cut short by war service, from which he returned to Australia as a 'cot case' after a severe knee wound in 1917. He was awarded the Military Cross for a night raid at Armentières in February 1917.¹⁷¹ He joined the South Australian RSL immediately on his return to Australia, and was vice-president from 1919 to 1921. In 1920 he was described as manager of the Light Square Branch of the Ice Cold Storage Works.¹⁷²

Price was a loyal and able deputy to Blackburn. He had a lower public profile, and preferred to gain the support of other League members through quiet lobbying rather than confrontation or force of personality. During the one year that he was South Australian RSL president, Price took great pains to point out to returned soldier unionists that the League was not against them or unionism,

¹⁷⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 11, 287-288.

¹⁷¹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 December 1920, 9.

¹⁷² *ibid.*

while at the same time warning about unscrupulous militants in the labour movement. In January 1921, he appealed to all returned soldier unionists to 'go back to their unions and to take a personal interest in unionism', assuring them that the RSL 'had never fought the unions, and he hoped they never would'.¹⁷³ But Price did believe that preference to soldiers was morally higher than preference to unionists. Referring to moves by the New South Wales state government to rescind preference to returned soldiers, he said:

If preference to unionists is correct in principle because the unionist has, through his efforts and his loyalty to his union, gained certain rights and advantages for his fellow workers, surely it is correct to grant preference to soldiers who made it possible for the unions to continue unmolested under a wide and free constitution.¹⁷⁴

Price spoke against Bolsheviks, who he thought were mostly young men of 'eligible wartime age' who had not enlisted and consequently had 'to look for a doctrine to

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, 21 January 1921, 10-11.

¹⁷⁴ *Sydney Sun*, 30 July 1921.

cover their inaction'¹⁷⁵, supported the immigration of British ex-servicemen because they would keep Australia 'white' and would help to stamp out 'red ragers'¹⁷⁶, and favoured compulsory acquisition of land for soldier settlers.¹⁷⁷ The reasons for his resignation are unknown.

Price's successor in February 1922 was also a son of a South Australian premier, although from the other side of politics. Charles Philip Butler was born in 1880, son of Conservative politician Richard (later Sir Richard) Butler, and brother of South Australian Liberal premier Richard (later Sir Richard) Layton Butler. After service in the South African War, he returned to Australia in 1902 and worked for his father's stock firm. In 1909 he became an auctioneer for the South Australian Farmers' Co-operative Union and by 1916 was manager of its stock department. Butler had continued his association with the military after returning from the South African War, and by 1914 had reached the rank of major. He joined the AIF with that rank in March 1916 and was made second-in-command of the 43rd Battalion in May that year. Butler was promoted to

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Diggers Gazette*, 21 August 1921, 12.

¹⁷⁷ Central Council Minutes, 4 June 1919, 13.

lieutenant-colonel and appointed commanding officer of the 43rd Battalion in France in February 1917, and led the battalion throughout that year. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in June 1917.¹⁷⁸

Butler was invalided home in February 1918 and unsuccessfully attempted to raise a 'Butler's 500' to return to France.¹⁷⁹ He returned to the Farmers' Union but as an auctioneer, not as manager of the stock department, a position which, 'to his chagrin', had been filled by another.¹⁸⁰ He became active in the RSL and was elected president on 16 February 1922, a position he held until the end of 1924.¹⁸¹

Between 1925 and 1929 Butler took up a soldier-settlement wheat farm but returned to Adelaide to become agricultural editor of the

¹⁷⁸ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 503-504.

¹⁷⁹ 'Butler's 500' illustrates how difficult it was to obtain recruits towards the end of the war. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* notes that, 'despite a vigorous campaign', Butler's 500 was still incomplete when the war ended, Butler having 300 names only 37 of whom had actually enlisted (v. 7, 504).

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 504.

¹⁸¹ State Council, 16 February 1922, n.p., Minutes of the South Australian Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia State Council, RSL State Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter State Council Minutes); *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 504.

Advertiser and the *Chronicle*.¹⁸² He retained an interest in the military, being promoted colonel in 1922, commanding the 6th Cavalry Brigade between 1921 and 1924, and remaining on the reserve of officers until 1940.¹⁸³ He died in 1953, and was interred in the AIF cemetery, West Terrace, with 'the biggest funeral ever seen there'.¹⁸⁴

During his three-year presidency of the state branch, Butler adopted a much more public style than Price and spoke on a wide range of issues. He advocated that the League take a greater role in national issues such as defence, immigration, taxation and Empire trading while retaining its non-political charter¹⁸⁵, spoke in favour of Australian ex-soldiers being settled on the land before Imperial ex-servicemen¹⁸⁶, and expressed suspicion about pacifists¹⁸⁷. Under Butler's tutelage, the state branch became particularly vocal about suppressing the German language in Australia and placing an embargo on German goods¹⁸⁸ (the branch's

¹⁸² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 504.

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Digger*, 28 September 1923, 21.

¹⁸⁶ *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 May 1922, 30.

¹⁸⁷ *Digger*, 28 September 1923, 20.

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, S.A. Premier's sec to S.A. RSL sec, 12 October 1922, SRSA GRG 24/6/1919, No. 1850, and State Council, 12 September 1922, 103, State Council Minutes.

strident anti-Germanism had diminished in the last two years of Blackburn's term and for the year that Price was president), reaffirming support for a White Australia¹⁸⁹, condemning the influence of American films¹⁹⁰, and lobbying for improved conditions for land settlement.¹⁹¹

Butler was a 'central figure' in the so-called Ryan case.¹⁹² In 1923 the federal government appointed V.H. Ryan, a South Australian public servant and former member of the State War Council, as representative to the British Empire Exhibition Commission. The appointment caused an 'uproar' in the RSL because Ryan was not a returned soldier and government policy was to give preference to ex-servicemen.¹⁹³ In the ensuing fracas, Butler travelled to Melbourne with affidavits attesting that Ryan, although declared medically fit for active service, had applied to the Defence Department for exemption from service and, when this was refused, had been classed as indispensable by the South

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, *Digger*, 21 August 1922, 31.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, State Council, 12 September 1922, 107, State Council Minutes.

¹⁹¹ See, for example, *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 January 1922, 23.

¹⁹² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 504.

¹⁹³ Kristianson, *Politics of Patriotism*, 31.

Australian government.¹⁹⁴ Although Ryan's appointment was eventually confirmed, the federal government created another senior post on the Exhibition Commission's staff which was 'more important than Ryan's' and appointed to it an ex-serviceman.¹⁹⁵ The effect of this was to secure continued preference for ex-servicemen in public service appointments'.¹⁹⁶

William Francis James McCann, South Australian RSL president from 1925 to 1929 and again in 1931, was born in Adelaide in 1892, the son of an engine driver. After attending Adelaide High School, he qualified in 1913 as a teacher with the Education Department and taught at a number of public schools. He enlisted in the AIF as a private on 24 August 1914 and embarked as a sergeant in October.¹⁹⁷ McCann's career in the AIF was extraordinary: he rose from private to battalion commander (major, 10th battalion) and was awarded an MC and a DSO. He was

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 32-34.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 35. Acting federal RSL president Ernest Turnbull gives an interesting account of this episode in the Turnbull papers, NLA MS1942-1. President Gilbert Dyett, who was at the time attending an American Legion conference in New Orleans, strongly objected to the way the RSL had handled the affair in his absence. See Kristianson, *Politics of Patriotism*, 28-36.

¹⁹⁶ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 504.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*, v. 10, 217.

wounded twice, once at Pozieres and again at Louverval Wood. He returned to Australia in June 1919 after leading the 3rd Brigade in the victory march through London on Anzac Day 1919.¹⁹⁸

After the war, he studied law and formed a partnership with Blackburn in 1925. He joined the Australian Military Forces in 1927 as a company commander in the 10th Battalion, transferred to the 43rd Battalion that same year and quickly became its commanding officer with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. McCann was vice-president of the South Australian RSL from 1921 to 1923 and president from 1924 to 1929. He resigned in that year to contest as a Nationalist the seat of Boothby in the House of Representatives, but was unsuccessful. In 1935 he was awarded the OBE for his activities on behalf of ex-servicemen.¹⁹⁹ Hans Zwillinger describes him as 'an able speaker and a keen debater with a pleasant and tenacious personality'.²⁰⁰ He died in 1957.

As South Australian RSL president, McCann was particularly vocal about defending the principle of preference to returned

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*

soldiers²⁰¹, protecting the jobs of disabled servicemen²⁰², lobbying the federal government for increased spending on defence²⁰³, reminding an uninterested and forgetful general public about the debt it owed soldiers²⁰⁴, and urging the League to maintain an active interest in 'national affairs.'²⁰⁵ McCann also presided over a surge in sub-branch protests against immigration from southern Europe.²⁰⁶

McCann was a youthful RSL president, but not exceptionally so. He was twenty-seven when he returned to Australia as battalion commander, thirty-three when he first became RSL president. Blackburn became a hero when he was twenty-four and a high-profile RSL president at twenty-five. Price was thirty-one when he was invalided to Australia, thirty-four when he succeeded Blackburn as president. Butler was a bit older, thirty-six when attempting to raise his '500' and forty-two when he became RSL president. The first

²⁰¹ See, for example, State Council, 6 December 1927, 378-379, State Council Minutes.

²⁰² *ibid.*, 378.

²⁰³ See, for example, Congress, 28 November 1928, 18, NLA MS6609/3.

²⁰⁴ State Council, 8 June 1926, 295-296, State Council Minutes.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, State Council, 13 June 1928, 424, State Council Minutes; Congress, 28 November 1928, 23, NLA MS6609/3.

²⁰⁶ See, for example, State Council, 8 December 1926, 321-322, State Council.

returned soldier president of the South Australian, McPhee, had been forty-one, his successor Barrett forty-three, while Price Weir stands out as an exception at fifty-one. This youthfulness is not surprising. The enlistment age of the AIF was between eighteen and forty-five, with an average age of twenty-five. Even if the RSL had evolved into an organisation led by senior officers - which it did not - seniority was not synonymous with age. Butler commanded a battalion at thirty-seven, McCann at twenty-six.

If the RSL was an organisation led by the young, the Cheer-Up Society was an organisation led by the middle-aged. Sowden was fifty-eight in 1916, Henderson was sixty, Seager was forty-six, Vaughan was forty-two, 'unusually young ... for a premier'²⁰⁷, Owen Smyth was sixty-five, Sandford was fifty-seven, and Benny was forty-seven. The importance of this lies not in the difference in age itself, but in what age was seen to bring - experience, respect and status. When war broke out, Sowden had had time to establish his career and his position in society, and was a widely-known and respected

²⁰⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 12, 313. Vaughan had become premier when forty.

public figure. The same was true of Henderson, Owen Smyth, Benjamin, and probably McEwin and Mills, all long-serving, senior and respected members of a number of public and private bodies. Age, and through it social prominence, was the source of the Cheer-Up Society's elitism. Given no war and another twenty years, figures like Blackburn, Price, Butler, and McCann may well have come to occupy positions similar to those Sowden, McEwin and Henderson held. None of the Cheer-Up Society's leaders came from 'old' Adelaide families with ties to the land, none had backgrounds of wealth or particular privilege. The same was true of the RSL's leaders. What catapulted them to prominence a generation earlier than might have been expected was war service.

But if Sowden's resistance to returned soldiers taking up responsible positions in the Cheer-Up Society and his later animosity to the RSL were reactions to a perceived challenge to traditional authority and leadership based on age, experience and status, the results of this challenge were both temporary and limited. Returned soldiers of relatively young age did fill positions of responsibility, but generally only those directly related to repatriation and in their

own organisations, such as the RSL. The effect this had on repatriation (and, more indirectly, on the public service through such things as preference to returned soldiers) can neither be underestimated nor quantified. But in the wider society, traditional patriarchs remained in traditional patriarchal positions. Twenty years later, the special status of the returned soldier merged with that of the traditional patriarch. War veterans came to occupy positions of authority and prestige in wider society not because those positions demanded war service but because war service was one valuable asset among several others. Former RSL state secretary A.R.G. Fearby, for example, became chairman of the South Australian Repatriation Board in 1921²⁰⁸ because he was a returned soldier and that position had to be filled by a returned soldier. On the other hand, Blackburn was appointed city coroner in 1933 because he was a lawyer, a former member of Parliament, and a war hero. Being a war hero was a decided asset but not mandatory for the job. Had Sowden worked for the coroner's office, he would have welcomed such a distinguished

²⁰⁸ State Council, 2 June 1921, 77, State Council Minutes.

colleague. In 1918, he probably felt threatened by him.

The parting of the ways between the Cheer-Up Society and the RSL, as shown by Sowden and McEwin's resignations in November 1916, Sowden's public siding in 1918 with the SASF in its dispute with the RSL, his war of words with the RSL in 1919 and 1920, and the veiled references in Mills' book to the RSL's ingratitude, did not spell the complete end of formal ties between the two organisations. After Sowden resigned as president and before he fought with it publicly, he continued to associate with the RSL both as president of the 'RSA and CUS Magazine Committee'²⁰⁹ and as a 'civilian' trustee of the RSL's building fund.²¹⁰ As well, an amalgam of military officers, Cheer-Up workers and RSL members made up the core of the Australian Imperial Association which was formed in Adelaide in 1919 to 'combat Bolshevism' and to 'perpetuate the spirit of the AIF'.²¹¹

Sowden and the RSL were publicly reconciled in November 1920, when Sowden

²⁰⁹ RSA and CUS Magazine Committee meeting, 3 April 1917, 139, RSA Minute Book.

²¹⁰ Committee Meeting, 4 April 1917, 140, *ibid.*

²¹¹ *Advertiser*, 15 April 1919.

assured the officials of the League that the article referred to was written with the sole object of impressing not on any particular association, but on all public associations, the need for the adoption of businesslike methods in the conduct of their financial affairs.²¹²

The RSL withdrew its previous accusations and was 'pleased to state that they now feel sure that no feeling of vindictiveness or unworthy motive would animate the mind of such a public-spirited man as Sir William'.²¹³

The main cause of friction between Sowden and the RSL was not personal animosity but differences in outlook. The RSL was a product of a period of change. It argued that the state owed its existence to its soldiers and that therefore it was the state, and not small groups of private citizens, which should be responsible for their repatriation. It also believed that repatriation should be funded through a system in which all citizens were required to contribute consistent with their ability to pay, not through a system which relied on the charitable benevolence of

²¹² *ibid.*, 1 November 1920, 6.

²¹³ *ibid.* Both comments were probably part of an out-of-court libel settlement.

a few individuals. The RSL argued further that the administration of repatriation should be centralised so that assistance could be distributed according to consistent guidelines. In this, the war experience of veterans could override their class and political backgrounds and allegiances and lead them to adopt certain 'radical' viewpoints, in this case support for the argument that the state should assume wider powers and primary responsibility for the welfare of veterans.

The values of Sowden and the Cheer-Up Society, however, were those of conservatives in Adelaide and throughout Australia. These values were formed and shaped in a society vastly different from that which emerged from the first world war. All the same, such conservatives did adjust to change, if only because circumstances forced them to. State and federal governments may have wished to avoid 'interfering' with patriotic funds, but they did recognise the need for government to oversee and safeguard organisations which relied heavily on public benevolence. And the task of repatriation was far too large to be left to prewar instrumentalities and organisations. If the RSL did have any success in gaining representation on various

repatriation boards or influencing governments to assume more responsibility for returned soldiers, it was partly because the changes that war brought made it impossible for the old ways to continue. Even conservatives had to abandon the status quo when it became clear that the status quo was no longer acceptable.

Chapter 3

There is only the war

Between 1916 and 1918 the RSL continued to insist that it was a non-party political body while readily and publicly supporting the war aims of Prime Minister W.M. Hughes and, from January 1917, the Nationalist Party.¹ To effect this, it argued that there was a difference between matters of 'national interest' and 'politics'.² The RSL leadership argued, for example, that its support for federal government responsibility for repatriation was similar to its support for the Nationalist Party's war platform - both were matters of 'national interest'. But some RSL members believed that lobbying for federal responsibility for repatriation was the activity of a non-party political pressure group³, and that supporting the

¹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 6-7.

² Robson, *Australia in the Nineteen Twenties*, 10-11.

³ Graham Wootton notes that there are 'official' and 'unofficial' groups in society. 'Official' groups are defined as those which have a recognised range of decision making and sanctions such as Cabinet and Parliament. Of the many 'unofficial' groups, two have an interest in the political process. One is the political parties, which concentrate on gaining temporary control of the decision-making apparatus. The other includes 'pressure groups', which seek

Nationalist Party was overtly political. They argued that before the RSL could truly claim to be 'non-party political', it would have to recognise more clearly what constituted 'political' matters, and avoid them. They were opposed by those who argued that the RSL, instead of distinguishing between 'political' and 'national' issues, should declare itself a political group and continue outright support for the Nationalist Party. The highly politicised nature of Australian society between 1916 and 1918 made such questions irrelevant. The editor of *R.S.A. Magazine* was right when he said that although the South Australian RSA was strictly 'non-political', there was 'only the war' and 'the absolute necessity for us winning it'.⁴ Those in the RSL who wanted to find 'middle ground' were looking for something which did not exist. Although the RSL tried to distinguish between 'national' and 'political' issues, the question of loyalty dominated any other consideration. Loyalty was a finely balanced thing. The RSL, with an eye to future membership, could claim 'neutrality' and try to implement it, but the atmosphere

'favourable decisions from the existing official groups'. (Wootton, *The Politics of Influence*, 4, 8.)

⁴ *R.S.A. Magazine*, April 1916, 5.

engendered by the war and the RSL's association with the 'win the war' party meant that it interpreted any dissent, such as labour unrest, as disloyal or, after 1917, 'Bolshevik'. In this, the RSL was a microcosm of a society in which neutrality was impossible and in which questions on the conduct of the war subsumed all else.

The earliest RSL moves to distinguish between political matters and those of 'national interest' took place at its first national congress in September 1916, which was attended by representatives from returned soldier associations in South Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania and Queensland. In a discussion of the draft constitution, a Victorian delegate moved that the word 'non-political' be deleted on the grounds that 'if that expression were left in the rule, and anything of a national character should arise, they would not have the power to take part in it'.⁵ When a Tasmanian representative suggested an amendment that 'non-party' be inserted in place of 'non-political', the delegates divided into two camps of almost equal size. Neither group denied that the RSL would one day have to discuss or become

⁵ Congress, 11 September 1916, 23, NLA MS6609/11.

involved in political issues, but those opposing the amendment felt that 'non-party' would preclude the RSL's forming a political party of its own. When the amendment was put, thirteen voted for and eleven against, South Australia probably voting with the latter.⁶ With the expression 'non-party' ensconced in the constitution, there remained the problem of how to separate 'political' from 'national' issues. Eventually congress decided that the RSL would be 'national and non-sectarian', with 'the attitude of each branch ... subject to the manifesto to be issued once every quarter by the central council'.⁷

This did not end the RSL's problems. Many members believed that the RSL should be outrightly political and prepared to comment on any issue without trying to determine whether or not that issue was 'political' or 'national'. Calls for the RSL's involvement in politics increased after the Nationalist Party was formed in January 1917. At first, the RSL supported the Nationalist Party on the grounds that, because it was the only party which could steer Australia towards a victory in the war, this support was not

⁶ *ibid.*, 23-25.

⁷ *ibid.*, 62.

political but a matter of national interest. Early in 1917 the South Australian RSL's central committee resolved that

... we feel at this time of National Crisis that the spirit of Sacrifice should be paramount and we feel that any and all possible concessions should be made by the parties now forming the National[ist] Party and we sincerely ask that a compromise be arrived at in the nation's interest and we will guarantee the support of our association in returning the National[ist] Party.⁸

An executive committee formed in January 1917 to prepare a platform for the new Nationalist Party included federal RSL president Colonel W.K. Bolton.⁹ When Bolton was later nominated to the Senate, the RSL's central council resolved that 'the action taken by our President re his nomination to the Senate is approved and ... he has the confidence of this Council of the League'.¹⁰

The Nationalist committee also included federal RSL secretary Corporal E.G. Evans.¹¹

⁸ Special Committee Meeting, 21 March 1917, 135-136, RSA Minute Book.

⁹ *Advertiser*, 10 January 1917.

¹⁰ Central Council, 31 May 1917, 3, Central Council Minutes.

¹¹ *Advertiser*, 10 January 1917. Evans was formerly treasurer of the South Australian branch.

Although Evans felt that it was necessary to assure his state branch that 'his position on the "Win the War Party" was not in an official [RSL] capacity'¹², many members felt that such justification was unnecessary.¹³ On the whole the RSL preferred to sidestep the issue of the right of its members to stand for Parliament. The South Australian branch claimed that it supported any returned soldier who stood as a parliamentary candidate, regardless of party. 'Returned men should get the idea well into their minds', D. Kerr told its monthly committee meeting in February 1918, 'that the league did not stand for any party, and that they should vote for returned men, and thus get representatives on both sides'.¹⁴ A situation where two returned soldiers from differing parties contested the same seat was not discussed. The branch also attempted to influence civilian candidates, irrespective of party. In April 1918 it distributed a questionnaire to candidates asking, among other things, 'are you prepared to assist and use your utmost endeavour in obtaining adequate reinforcements for

¹² Central Committee, 15 January 1917, 103, RSA Minute Book.

¹³ See, for example, the letter from J.K. Langsford, 'late 16th Battalion AIF', in *Advertiser*, 11 January 1917.

¹⁴ *Advertiser*, 7 February 1918.

Australians overseas?' Other questions dealt with preference, public service superannuation payments for dependants of deceased servicemen, and soldier settlement.¹⁵

By contrast, certain RSL figures deliberately courted controversy by maintaining high public profiles and refusing to tailor their comments either to solicit public approval or assuage public fears. Chief among these was William Burns, general organiser of the RSL. Virtually nothing is known of Burns. Had he lived longer - he died in office in August 1918 - it is possible that he may have gained a more durable place in the RSL, possibly even in national life. But Burns was very much an 'early' RSL member. As the organisation became more established and more circumspect, 'radicals' such as Burns probably found the RSL too restrictive and their opinions more suited to other, more overtly partisan organisations, possibly where identity as a returned soldier was secondary to identity as an adherent to a particular political cause.

In 1917 Burns, in common with many RSL members, believed that it was possible to

¹⁵ *Advertiser*, 16 March 1918; *Returned Soldier*, April 1918, 21.

distinguish between 'political matters' and those of 'national importance'. Addressing the RSL's central council in September 1917, he said:

It may be permissible for me to draw your attention to the ever increasing number of our members who believe that this movement should take a stronger hand in political affairs ... I believe that to maintain our position as a national body we must steer clear of all industrial political and sectarian conflict and organise to see that ... returned men will see fair play ... I think as a national and non-party organization the time has come when some understanding should be come to on some very important national questions ... I believe that this organization should become more of a propagandist body than a political one.¹⁶

Despite these strong words, Burns typified the ambivalent attitude of the RSL towards its political position during the war years. A strong supporter of conscription, he was also highly critical of conservative businessmen who he believed regarded the RSL with either suspicion or apathy. A fearless

¹⁶ Central Council, 6 September 1917, 28-29, Central Council Minutes.

supporter of apparently 'political' causes, he was also one of the most vocal defenders of the RSL's 'non-political' constitution. In January 1917 Burns addressed a South Australian RSL meeting in the Adelaide Town Hall. Commenting on the 'handful' of non-veterans attending, 'most of whom were ladies', Burns saw the lack of interest in the RSL as evidence of the public's repudiation of the debt it owed soldiers. The citizens of Adelaide were 'suspicious' of the RSL, he continued, and, referring to the recent defeat of conscription, remarked that the public 'had a guilty conscience that they had not done a square thing by the returned soldiers'.¹⁷ Burns then went a step further:

The decline in the spirit of Australia [he said] was due to the fact that the Houses of Parliament and public institutions had fallen under the control of a lot of time-servers, political opportunists, and impostors ... The proper thing to do would be to string those fellows on the lampposts of the city streets if the thing went on much longer. What they wanted in Australia was a Venizelos to lead the loyalist army (Cheers) ... The Government were deserving of credit because they had

¹⁷ *Advertiser*, 17 January 1917.

done everything they could with the machinery at their command ... the unfortunate thing was that Parliament had failed, Australia had failed, and the Government were unable to do what they would like to do.¹⁸

These comments provoked an immediate public response. An *Advertiser* correspondent believed that the RSL was 'ill-advised in appealing to the public through such a mouthpiece' as Burns, and felt 'certain that if the men allow themselves to be controlled by tactless individuals public sympathy will be alienated'.¹⁹ The correspondent continued:

The citizens of the Commonwealth decided they would not have conscription, and Mr Burns must concede that the average Australian is intelligent enough to see through some of the political chess-board moves. Mr Burns' speech is likely to do the [RSL] harm. Influential citizens, particularly those who voted against conscription, are likely to have scant sympathy with an association whose speakers associate their appeals with the spirit of the IWW and threaten lamppost deaths to those who differ with them.²⁰

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 19 January 1917.

²⁰ *ibid.*

In September 1917 Burns filed an organiser's report which, while strongly recommending that the RSL continue to be a strictly neutral organisation, also stated that the future of the organisation lay with the 'working classes' rather than the 'city profiteers'.²¹ Further, he condemned the New South Wales RSL's support of the government in the recent tram and railway strike. The strikers, he noted, included about 450 returned men, 200 of whom had subsequently formed 'an organization of returned men to work in conjunction with the industrial organization and against this league'. This had damaged the RSL and shown that 'however much [returned soldiers] as individuals might have in common interest with either of the sides in conflict, they have interests as discharged soldiers that call upon them to stand united in support of same by standing apart from all industrial, political and sectarian difficulties as a national body'.²²

Burns criticised the attitude of certain 'city representative men in Melbourne'. A meeting organised in the Melbourne Town Hall by the Victorian RSL had been well

²¹ Central Council, 6 September 1917, 27, Central Council Minutes.

²² *ibid.*, 28. See also Central Council, 25 February 1918, 5-6, Central Council Minutes.

publicised, he noted, and 500 circulars had been sent 'to prominent city representative men inviting them to attend'. He continued:

Notwithstanding the innumerable professions of sympathy that we have been encouraged with from this section of the community (with the exception of a few) they were conspicuous by their absence from the meeting which was attended by approximately 1500 working men and women. I always expect to find the returned soldiers treated in this manner and am sorry to say I am never disappointed. The hypocrisy and cant of the city profiteers is the chief feature of our national life, and I think it is nearly time that your Council should openly acknowledge that it is conscious of this.²³

The RSL's central council was not ready to 'openly acknowledge' this. It resolved that 'the Organiser's report be left in the hands of the President to delete such part of the report which discretion demands'.²⁴

The dictates of discretion did not stifle the debate over the RSL's political role. At the same meeting at which Burns presented his report, Tasmanian RSL delegates

²³ *ibid.*, 6 September 1917, 27.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 5 September 1917, 22, 6 September 1917, 26-29.

to the central council suggested removing the constitution's non-political clause, arguing that 'members of this League everywhere seem to be of the opinion that the day must come when we will have to take a stronger stand politically than at present'.²⁵ A committee appointed in April 1918 to revise the RSL's constitution suggested that the words 'non-political and non-sectarian' be replaced with 'national and non-sectarian'.²⁶

In South Australia the editors of *Returned Soldier* constantly urged the RSL to take a more political stand. *Returned Soldier* was published by a syndicate which claimed to be comprised of financial members of the RSL while at the same time completely independent of it.²⁷ The magazine frequently criticised the RSL, which publicly disclaimed any connection with it.²⁸ In March 1918 *Returned Soldier* argued that 'if Rets. are to get a fair deal they've got to have direct representation in Parliament', and that it

²⁵ *ibid.*, 46.

²⁶ 'Suggested alterations...by the Revisionary Committee at its recent sitting', 9 May 1918, 3, Central Council Minutes.

²⁷ *Returned Soldier*, 2 May 1918, 44. The magazine was edited by C.W. Chandler of the 43rd and 16th battalions, its business editor was Lieutenant P.G. Melville of the 10th Battalion, and its advertising manager was Corporal A.E. Tucker of the 32nd and the 48th battalions (*Returned Soldier*, 6 June 1918, 4).

²⁸ *Advertiser*, 8 April 1918.

could 'put the claims of our candidates before the public, whereas the "R.S.A. Magazine", being non-political, cannot'.²⁹ Lamenting that so few returned soldiers were standing for Parliament, *Returned Soldier* also argued that 'it is generally recognized among the Rets. that we must have direct representation in Parliament'.³⁰ When the South Australian RSL distributed questionnaires to parliamentary candidates, *Returned Soldier* lauded what it saw as belated RSL involvement in politics:

We are glad to see the [RSL] is departing from its avowed policy not to interfere in politics. That is a policy we as members of the Association do not hold with, for if the Rets. don't butt into the political game for all we are worth we shall be a long time becoming that power in the land which we are destined to become.³¹

There were other reasons for *Returned Soldier's* hostility towards the RSL. It believed that the RSL leadership was ineffective, self-serving, and detached from

²⁹ *Returned Soldier*, March 1918, 42.

³⁰ *ibid.*, March 1918, 18.

³¹ *ibid.*, April 1918, 21.

the League's rank and file members.³² It also accused the RSL of being exclusive, claiming that it had no time for returned soldiers who did not join the organisation.³³ *Returned Soldier* believed that the South Australian RSL's constitutional structure was 'undemocratic' and its leadership unrepresentative. In June 1918 it accused the RSL of being run by a clique which did not represent the majority of returned soldiers. The general public, it said, had been 'duped' by a recent appeal for cash by the South Australian RSL's executive because it did not realise that the organisation did not represent all returned soldiers.³⁴

Returned Soldier was also suspicious of individual committeemen's motives in seeking office. In November 1918 it said that 'in Adelaide it seems that some of the inner circle of the R.S.A. belong to that organisation merely for the purpose of getting what they can out of it'.³⁵ In the January 1919 issue 'Dinkum Digger' criticised the South Australian RSL executive for 'reaching out for all the limelight and other

³² See, for example, *Returned Soldier*, 25 June 1918, 9, 15 October 1918, 55, 14 November 1918, 5.

³³ *ibid.*, 25 June 1918, 9.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*, 14 November 1918, 5.

perks pertaining to their office'. He wrote that the RSL was doing nothing 'to see that a mob of cold-footers get the kickout of the pay-office and other homes for slackers', and, referring to the annual RSL congress, added that 'we cannot hope for much from the present push of heads, who seem to be keen on getting nice trips to Melbourne and other cities as delegates from the Association':

What good does [sic] these so-called conferences do? Nothing - absolutely nothing.³⁶

Little wonder, he concluded, that returned soldiers showed so much apathy at annual RSL elections.³⁷

It was common for *Returned Soldier* to look to the time when the 'real' soldiers would return to Australia and claim control of the RSL. In May 1918 it advised returned soldiers to stay with the RSL because, although there was little chance of having their grievances remedied under the existing administration, 'when the virile men return you will see the R.S.A. run on different lines'.³⁸ In July 1918 it warned SASF

³⁶ *ibid.*, 10 January 1919, 39.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*, 2 May 1918, 44.

secretary Winterbottom that if he was currently winning his battle with the RSL, it was because he was dealing with the war's wreckage, a situation which would change when the able-bodied soldiers returned to Australia.³⁹ 'No Ret. comes back here and wants to own the country', *Returned Soldier* commented, 'No, Mr Winterbottom, most of us come back too physically sick to do that, and those of us who would be able to make such an absurd boast are too disgusted with the apathy of many stay-at-homes'.⁴⁰ In January 1920 *Returned Soldier* claimed that all the committee members seeking re-election had returned to Australia early in the war. It noted:

The Committee, which has, to date, carried on the affairs of the League, have practically all again nominated for the present election, basing their claim to the favour of electors on what the League has accomplished up to date. Unfortunately this Committee are all men who returned in the early part of the war, and while we all recognise what they have done, the 15,000 men who have lately returned naturally wonder when they see that none of themselves are being

³⁹ *ibid.*, 10 July 1918, 6.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

included in the list of these nominations.⁴¹

Complaints about the prevalence of officers in the South Australian RSL were also common. In August 1918 *Returned Soldier* criticised the RSL's lack of success in gaining concessions from the South Australian Soldiers' Fund and commented that a 'vigorous offensive' against the SASF's secretary H.E. Winterbottom would 'never be inaugurated while the R.S.A. is run by a select few, mainly officers, non-com. and otherwise'.⁴²

The complaints about the prevalence of officers in the South Australian RSL reflect tensions which had also existed in the AIF. Although a full discussion of the relationship between officers and enlisted men in the AIF is beyond the scope of this thesis, some examination helps explain some of the early difficulties in the RSL. C.E.W. Bean maintained that the distinctions between officers and enlisted men in the AIF were less rigid than in other armies of the first world war, notably the British Army, because 'officers were chosen from the whole force instead of certain social classes within it' and because 'it was the deliberate policy of

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 2 January 1920, 4.

⁴² *ibid.*, 29 August 1918, 7.

the Force that officers should live largely among their troops', conversing freely with them as did managers 'with the old hands of an Australian sheep station'.⁴³

Lloyd Robson has argued that 'the nature of the officer class ... was not quite so democratic in origin and nature as might appear'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, there are grounds for the assertion that the acceptance of a certain qualitative or social difference between officers and enlisted men was never so widespread in Australia as in other belligerent countries. For example, arguments in federal parliament over the relative rates of pay for officers and enlisted men often hinted that the former deserved higher rates by virtue of position rather than responsibility, but stopped short of blatantly recognising or reinforcing any strict qualitative difference. The 1914 Pensions Act provided for the payment of £1 per week to the widow of a private and £3 per week for the widow of an officer, but the Labor Government countered the Liberal argument that officers and officers'

⁴³ C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, v. 1 (8th edition, 1938), 550, cited in L.L. Robson, 'The origin and character of the First A.I.F., 1914-18; some statistical evidence', *Historical Studies*, 15:61 (October 1973), 746-747.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 747.

dependants should receive even higher rates of pensions with the contention that 'officers, who received higher wages whilst on service, could afford to make other provisions by way of insurance or direct saving'.⁴⁵ The Australian government therefore 'virtually accepted the principle of approximate equality by refusing to raise officers' pensions'.⁴⁶ A certain presumption of rough equality between officers and enlisted men was also made by semi-government and unofficial bodies, sometimes from quarters in which one would least expect to find it. For example, the Emergency Relief Committee of the South Australian Soldiers' Fund decided in April 1917 'not to recommend any differentiation in the treatment of Soldiers in regard to rank'.⁴⁷

Alfred Vagts has noted the prevalence of former officers in many ex-service organisations, and has argued that officers were more likely to be drawn to ex-service organisations than enlisted men.⁴⁸ Describing the rise of officers' associations such as

⁴⁵ L.J. Pryor, 'Origins of Australia's Repatriation Policy, 1914-1920', MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1932, 18.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the South Australian Soldiers' Fund, Emergency Relief Committee, 27 April 1917, 250.

⁴⁸ Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, New York, Meridian Books, 1959, 355.

the Order of the Cincinnati in the United States, he has commented that 'the earliest of such soldiers' organisations ... were those of officers'. He attributes this to the fact that 'interest and the memory of a - perhaps only comparatively - glorious past life drew them together more easily than the recollection of unrelieved hardships brings privates into societies'.⁴⁹ In Britain different ex-service associations catered for different kinds of membership. There were many officers in the Comrades of the Great War, few officers in the National Association or the National Federation and fewer officers still in the National Union of Ex-Service Men (NUX). BLESMA, for blind servicemen, was 'basically a ranker organisation', while the British Legion contained fewer officers 'than might be expected'. One reason for the latter was competition from an Officers' Association which had its own Royal Charter, its own funds and its own system of government. But, as Graham Wootton has noted, 'officers have figured prominently in both the presidency and the chairmanship of the Legion'.⁵⁰

In Australia the RSL was in many respects unique in having a mix of officers,

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Wootton, *Politics of Influence*, 65.

NCOs and enlisted men among its members. Sol Encel has argued that senior officers have, with few exceptions, 'played no part in the affairs' of Australian ex-service organisations, 'especially those with political functions like the RSL, whose leadership is drawn almost entirely from junior officers or NCOs'.⁵¹ He also notes that Legacy's establishment in 1925 provided a 'distinctive outlet for senior officers'.⁵²

An examination of the South Australian RSL State Council between 1920 and 1924 confirms that the state leadership was drawn chiefly from junior officers, NCOs and enlisted men. The State Council was the chief controlling group of the state RSL branch. At the end of the war the South Australian RSL was being run by a committee comprising delegates from sub-branches (country) and sub-sections (metropolitan). This relatively simple structure proved adequate until large leaps in membership in 1919 revealed a need for a more sophisticated structure to ensure adequate representation of all members, both country and metropolitan. The state was subsequently divided into thirteen district

⁵¹ Sol Encel, *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1972, 477.

⁵² *ibid.*

councils and one metropolitan district. Each district council was composed on one representative from each of the sub-branches under its jurisdiction, and in turn nominated one representative to the State Council. The metropolitan district returned six representatives to State Council, and one president and five vice-presidents were elected by plebiscite of the whole state.⁵³

Altogether the State Council comprised thirteen country and six metropolitan representatives, five vice-presidents and the president. It appointed delegates to the annual national congress and instructed them how to vote. To ensure that all RSL members could become state councillors without financial disadvantage, city councillors received expenses of 15/- a day 'when losing pay' and country councillors received the same amount in addition to their fares.⁵⁴

Throughout the year South Australian RSL sub-branches forwarded resolutions to State Council for debate. Council then decided what action on each should be taken. Important

⁵³ State Council Minutes, 16 April 1920, 54-56. Membership of the South Australian RSL was 10/-, which was distributed so that each sub-branch gained 5/-, the relevant district council 1/-, and State Council 4/-, the last from which was paid capitation fees to the federal body and the cost of badges.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 2 June 1921, 81.

matters affecting the constitution of the RSL were placed on the agenda of the next sub-branch conference, an annual event which fulfilled the same role at state level as did national congress at federal level. The Council was theoretically subservient to the sub-branch conference, but in practice exercised a considerable amount of power over the sub-branch resolutions passed to it throughout the year. Council could relatively easily overturn or alter these resolutions. For example, after disturbances in Sydney in May 1921, the Angaston sub-branch resolved that it should be compulsory throughout Australia 'for the Union Jack and Australian Flag to be carried at the head of all processions'. State Council debated the resolution as a motion and modified it to delete the Australian flag requirement.⁵⁵

State Council usually met about once a month, and between meetings the state president and five vice-presidents met weekly to discuss matters of urgency.⁵⁶ This arrangement was formalised in February 1920 when the unwieldy nature of the State Council led to the creation of a State Board comprising the president and five vice-

⁵⁵ State Council Minutes, 2 June 1921, 76.

⁵⁶ Report of Conference of State Secretaries, 3 November 1919, 2-3, NLA MS6609/11.

presidents, which submitted a management report to each council meeting.⁵⁷

Figure 1 lists details of the 71 men who served on the South Australian RSL State Council between 1920 and 1924, including five cases where it was not possible to distinguish between two men with similar or identical initials. Rank can be established for 64⁵⁸, of whom 27 were enlisted men, 14 non-commissioned officers, 2 chaplains, 17 2nd/lieutenants, lieutenants or captains, and 4 major or above.⁵⁹ This mix of privates, non-commissioned officers and junior officers within the one organisation had its own problems. *Returned Soldier* led the field in criticising the RSL leadership as officer-dominated, revealing from the first a strong anti-establishment, anti-officer bias. In June 1919 it remarked that some RSL members believed that 'there is too much of the officer element obtruding itself into the Association's affairs, others blame cliqueism

⁵⁷ State Council Minutes, c. 7 February 1920, 45.

⁵⁸ Excluding Rockliff, who with an MC must have been a commissioned officer but on whom no details are available.

⁵⁹ Apart from the diverse occupations, it is interesting to note that, of the 63 names where it is possible to establish when individuals returned to Australia (including the five cases where it was impossible to distinguish between two individuals), about half (34) are listed as returning to Australia before the war ended.

FIGURE 1: ALPHABETICAL LIST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RSL STATE COUNCILLORS, 1920 - 1924

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Axford, Melville Leonard	Commercial traveller	22/9/1915	18/10/1916	Private
Ayliffe, Stuart Hamilton	Civil servant	1/6/1915	7/2/1919	Lieutenant
OR				
Ayliffe, Sydney Hamilton	?	1/7/1915	10/7/1919	Captain
Bagster, Reginald	?	19/4/1917	10/7/1919	Private
Howell				
Banfield, Henry Charles	Stockowner (?)	8/12/1914	5/7/1915	Private
Barson, George	?	8/3/1915	21/3/1919	2nd/Lieutenant
Frederick				
Birtles, Ernest	Repatriation Clerk	16/9/1914	14/1/1917	Corporal
Blackburn, Arthur S.,	Solicitor	19/8/1914	16/10/1916	Lieutenant
VC				
Broderick, Patrick J.	?	26/2/1917	6/1/1919	Private
Butler, Charles Philip,	Land agent	25/3/1916	15/2/1918	Lieutenant -Colonel
DSO				
Campbell, Gordon C., MC	Solicitor	?	16/3/1919	Captain
Collins, Clement R.	?	19/8/1914	17/3/1916	Private

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Croston, Roland John	Constable	1/9/1915	3/7/1917	Private
Cudmore, C.R.	Solicitor	Not on AWM133		
Dalling, Harold	Auctioneer and agent	21/6/1916	26/7/1919	Driver
Dalziel, Allan H., MC	Commercial secretary	23/9/1915	23/6/1919	Lieutenant
Davey, [M.] O.L.	Draper	Not on AWM 133		
Dey, George	Metallurgist	?	22/11/1917	Captain
Dowling, James Francis	?	6/8/1915	19/6/1919	Company Quarter Master Sergeant
Duggin, Edward Stanley	?	14/9/1914	7/9/1915	Private
Epps, Henry Branch	Clerk	30/9/1915	15/4/1918	Private
Fearby, Aubrey Roland	[Justice of the Peace]	22/2/1915	8/8/1916	Private
Flaherty, Arleigh W.	Horticulturist	22/1/1916	5/11/1917	Lance Sergeant
Fletcher, Richard	?	?	9/2/1919	Lieutenant
Nicholas				
Gardner, Finnis George	Mail driver	25/2/1916	1/2/1918	Private
Godson, Henry	Blacksmith (?)	15/5/1915	10/9/1917	Corporal
[Edward?]				
Grayson, Walter Thomas	?	3/2/1916	4/5/1917	Sapper
Hawker, C.A.S.	Politician and pastoralist	1914 (Britain)	1920	Captain

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Heming, Hector Roy	Blocker (Waikerie)	?	31/7/1918	Captain
Hill, Joseph Henry	Schoolmaster	15/9/1914	23/10/1918	Private
OR				
Hill, Joseph Henry	?	29/12/1914	29/7/1915	Private
Horne, Charles Andrew	Storekeeper	21/9/1914	16/10/1918	Driver
Howard, John C.	Motorman/clerk (?)	Not on AWM133		
Johncock, Allan Samuel	Clerk	19/5/1917	9/2/1919	Private
Johnson, Harold Ernerst	Commercial traveller	23/5/1916	15/6/1919	Private
Johnson, Reginald	Driver	16/7/1915	12/2/1917	Sergeant
Wilfred				
Kendrew, George Willis	Clergyman (Methodist)	?	3/3/1916	Chaplain
Lane, Stanley Montieth	Saddler and Justice of the Peace	3/11/1916	5/3/1919	Gunner
Lawson, Reg Walter, MM	?	21/8/1914	15/9/1918	Lance Corporal
Lonnen, Thomas Henry	Printer and bookbinder	?	27/7/1917	Captain
Maddock, William	?	28/10/1916	28/8/1919	Driver
Thomas				
OR				

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Maddock, Walter Woodhead	?	9/8/1915	13/3/1918	Gunner
Mann, Clarence A.	Postmaster (?)	13/7/1915	4/6/1919	Lance Corporal
Martin, Eric John	?	8/6/1916	23/3/1919	Private
McCann, W.F.J., DSO, MC	Clerk	24/8/1914	20/5/1919	Major
McMillan, F.J.	Member of Parliament	Not on AWM133		
Mellor, Thomas R., OBE	Solicitor	?	3/5/1919	Major
Menzies, G.A.	?	13/11/1915	31/1/1918	Corporal
Menzies, Duncan OR	Auctioneer	?	10/1/1918	Captain
Menzies, Duncan	?	1/11/1915	1/6/1919	Private
Messenger, Percival A.	?	12/2/1916	22/3/1919	Lance Corporal
Mierisch, William James	[Justice of the Peace]	28/8/1916	19/8/1919	Sergeant
Montgomery, William	?	24/8/1914	14/1/1917	2nd/Lieutenant
Rockliff, [?], MC, MM	?	Not on AWM133		[Officer]
Neale, D'Arcy Lewis	Printer	8/6/1916	1/7/1919	Corporal
O'Connor, James Bernard	?	?	16/10/1916	Lieutenant

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Pearce, C.I.	?	Not on AWM133		
Phillips, J.D.	Copper refiner	Not on AWM133		
Piper, Harold Bayard	?	21/6/1915	25/2/1919	Private
Price, Walter Davies, MC	Manager	1914 (?)	16/7/1917	Lieutenant
Pritchard, Harold K.	?	19/7/1915	20/12/1917	Sergeant
Rohn, [Sylvester E. (?)]	?	22/11/1915	1/7/1919	Bombardier
Rudall, Reginald John	Solicitor	?	6/5/1919	Captain
Solly, Gordon George	?	12/5/1915	25/2/1919	Lance Corporal
Stanhope, G.E.	?	13/11/1915	31/1/1918	Corporal
Stanton, Leslie Ralph	?	14/11/1916	19/4/1919	Private
OR				
Stanton, Llewellyn Roy	?	18/8/1914	25/11/1918	Bombardier
Todd, David Leslie	?	?	?	Captain
Waite, W.C.N., DSO, MC	Live stock agent	20/8/1914	24/8/1918	Lieutenant-Colonel
Wood, Thomas Percy	Clergyman (Church of England)	?	4/6/1917	Chaplain

Name	Occupation	Enlisted	RTA	Rank
Woodhead, Robert George	?	9/9/1914	8/10/1915	Private

1. Occupations refer to the period 1920-1924, not as at enlistment.
2. Names missing from AWM133 could indicate men who enlisted under another name.

Sources: AWM133 ('Nominal roll of AIF who left Australia for service abroad, 1914-1918 war'); *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vv. 7, 9 & 12; Sands and McDougall *South Australian Directory*, 1920-1924; State Council Minutes, 1920-1924. I am grateful to Ashley Ekins who assisted me in compiling this list.

for the apathy that appears to be surrounding headquarters, and others again will persist in the thought that an infusion of new blood and brains into the internal workings of the Diggers' Association will yet bring about the desired result'.⁶⁰ In February 1919 it cited the case of a 43rd Battalion man who felt that he was misled in joining the RSL. He and some mates had been approached by an RSL organiser called Graham when they had arrived in Adelaide by train from Melbourne. The soldier had asked Graham 'distinctly if the Association was run by officers, as we heard it was on the boat coming out'. Graham had assured him that 'no officers had anything to do with running the Association'. The soldier then continued:

On active service the officers would not mix up with the privates in a comradely sort of way, and we want to know why we should mix up with them in civil life. Let them form their own select club or association, and let the Diggers run their own joint.⁶¹

In January 1919 *Returned Soldier* referred to the RSL's leadership as 'a select coterie ... who appear to have had no experience of the

⁶⁰ *Returned Soldier*, 27 June 1919, 5.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 7 February 1919, 5.

rank and file of the brave men who did their bit to keep Fritz in his proper place'.⁶²

The South Australian RSL was not prepared to allow these criticisms to pass undefended. It acknowledged that of necessity a small percentage of enlistments from the state had established and operated the organisation, but made no apology for this. The Committee, it contended, 'had borne in mind that one-sixth had on account of its return to Australia prior to the termination of hostilities, been charged with a moral obligation to establish a solid organisation which would in the near future be able to secure every just demand of Australia's defenders and their dependants'.⁶³ The RSL executive challenged assertions that it was dominated by officers. At the monthly general meeting of the RSL at Austral Gardens in December 1918, W.D. Price and president Blackburn responded to 'press and personal criticism' that there were too many officers on the RSL committee. Price argued that these officers had enlisted as privates and worked their way up the ranks of the AIF, and a motion of confidence in the

⁶² *ibid.*, 10 January 1919, 4.

⁶³ South Australian RSL Annual Report, 1918, in *Advertiser*, 21 January 1919.

executive was carried.⁶⁴ The RSL later claimed that no more than five per cent of members present at general meetings were officers. It admitted that at the last election three out of four men returned were officers, but of the eight commissioned officers currently on the committee, six had enlisted as privates and the other two were a doctor and a chaplain. It also claimed that none of these officers had anything to gain from being on the committee. Nearly all were 'comfortably off in private life', it argued, and noted that RSL work entailed considerable personal sacrifice.⁶⁵ Even *Returned Soldier* recognised some validity in this. In March 1920 it argued:

The fact that 75 per cent of the League's officials are ex-officers is not to be wondered at when it is realised that the Australian Army was officered, broadly, on the democratic principles that if a man had enough brains he would eventually obtain a commission. In the circumstances, it appears that the digger-voters are merely endorsing the verdict of the army authorities before them by

⁶⁴ *RSA Magazine*, January 1919, 8.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

returning those officers to official positions on the League's executive.⁶⁶

The South Australian RSL's social amenities were also criticised. One of the RSL's earliest goals had been to establish clubrooms. In March 1917 it resolved that 'our aim be to raise sufficient funds on Anzac Day to enable us to at once commence construction or purchase of a building for administration and social purposes so that we will be in a position to welcome returned soldiers to a home of their own to avoid the necessity of many of our comrades having to patronage [sic] Public Billiard Halls etc. to while [sic] away their leisure time'.⁶⁷ That April the *Advertiser* reported that special Anzac buttons would be sold on Anzac Day to raise funds 'to build suitable premises for Returned Soldiers'.⁶⁸ Large advertisements in country papers emphasised the social advantages of membership in a bid to strengthen sub-branches. In December 1918 a front page advertisement in the *Kadina and Wallaroo Times* mentioned the 'spacious club rooms' in the capital cities and many of the larger towns, and looked forward to the time

⁶⁶ *Returned Soldier*, 5 March 1920, 25.

⁶⁷ Adjourned committee meeting, 17 March 1917, RSA Minute Book, 132.

⁶⁸ *Advertiser*, 24 April 1917.

when the state branch owned its own residential club. Meals and accommodation were available in some capital cities, it continued, and

billiard rooms, reading, writing, and card rooms are at the disposal of members in all cities, and many of the sub-branches have quite comfortable club rooms with the same facilities. Concerts, re-unions of old battalion mates, lectures, etc. are nightly functions at all the clubs.⁶⁹

Despite this rosy picture, *Returned Soldier* was highly critical of the facilities offered by the club in Adelaide. 'Don't you think it's time we had some new men on the executive of the RSA, just to give the Diggers a real dinkum spin?', it asked in January 1920, 'the palpable fact is that the present executive have had a fair go to make the association HQ's what it should be, and that is a home for soldiers, and have failed miserably'.⁷⁰ Personalities were also important. *Returned Soldier* particularly disliked RSL secretary A.R.G. Fearby. In February 1920 it claimed that Fearby was

⁶⁹ *Kadina and Wallaroo Times*, 4 December 1918.

⁷⁰ *Returned Soldier*, 2 January 1920, 2.

directly responsible for many returned soldiers failing to join the RSA or allowing their financial membership to lapse. 'That well-paid official', it said, 'seems to be out of sight and out of hearing of the common herd of Diggers, who want a real live, homely, comradely sort of man running HQ's, not a man who seems only too keen on getting out of the way of the madding crowd, so to speak'.⁷¹ Relating this to general criticisms of the executive, it continued:

Our branch has been allowed to fall into the rear as a militant and powerful fighting organisation. For this unfortunate state of sleepfulness we have no hesitation in saying that our secretary is solely to blame. He is the square plug in the round hole every time. What is wanted is a typical Digger for the Diggers, and in this respect Secretary Fearby is a dismal failure.⁷²

Fearby resigned in September 1920.⁷³

Although *Returned Soldier* did not favour splitting the RSL and creating other returned

⁷¹ *ibid*, 25.

⁷² *ibid.*, 9 January 1920, 4.

⁷³ State Council minutes, 14 September 1920, 60.

soldier bodies⁷⁴, other individuals and organisations did. Some returned soldiers, frustrated at the RSL's failure to formulate a consistent political policy or to enter the political arena, joined rival organisations. In January 1918 Burns, at that time RSL acting general secretary, wrote to a Tasmanian colleague expressing concern at rival returned soldier organisations, and mentioning a movement among RSL members to enter politics:

The feeling here is very hard to judge, but the movement that is on foot to organize a separate, independent, national political soldiers' party is causing some stir. I know very little other than common rumour, but it is freely stated that a number of men who are members of the different branches of our League are busy organizing this new party ... Now I know that there is quite a lot of our strong men who believe that sooner or later we as an organization are bound to take our place in the political arena ... I have quite an open mind myself although I am certain that we could never hold this body together as a political machine. All the same I cannot condemn any of our chaps if

⁷⁴ See, for example, *Returned Soldier*, 17 January 1919, 4.

they should decide to enter the political field. It is obvious to most of us that we are being 'spoofed' by the reigning political powers, and just where we are likely to find ourselves in the future is impossible to foresee.⁷⁵

Burns then did 'condemn' those in the RSL who wished to enter politics, and made clear his own feelings:

It seems certain to me that if we throw our energy into properly establishing our League constitutionally, we can command public support that will prove irresistible, therefore for the time being we can afford to leave the political field to those that are anxious for a lot of useless worry. I would be very sorry to hear that you should become embroiled in this rumoured movement politically, and I am sure you will understand my motive for putting you on your guard against certain ambitious adventurers that are on the job. They are already counting on your support in Tasmania. In fact one of them has whispered your name to me. Personally and officially I have declined to discuss the matter, and I hope our leaders in this League will take up the same

⁷⁵ W. Burns to G. Foster, 9 January 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

attitude on the ground that the whole proposal is premature.⁷⁶

This 'rumoured movement' was the Soldiers' National Political Party, and the RSL was sufficiently anxious about being associated with the new organisation to forward a disclaimer to all state branches for publication in the local press.⁷⁷ Under the heading 'Letter to Returned Soldiers and Public Generally', it stated:

It has been brought to the notice of the Executive of 'The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia' that certain prominent officers, acting in a semi-military capacity in conjunction with citizens are canvassing support amongst returned soldiers and their friends for support to a proposal to organize a political party to be known as "The Soldiers' Party". Some of the promoters are well known members of this League and the Executive hereby desires to give notice to the public that the proposed party or these officers have no encouragement and are in no way connected with this League or any of the Branches in their actions politically.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Acting General Secretary, RSL to 'Comrades [in] each State', 19 January 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

It concluded with the familiar reminder that '[a]s an organization this League knows neither party nor sect, and members of the League are hereby appealed to and respectfully requested to discourage any attempt to exploit the sentiment attached to the words "returned soldiers" either for party or personal consideration'.⁷⁸

The Soldiers' National Political Party hoped to become the 'political' arm of the RSL. In May 1918 its general secretary, M.P. Pimentel, advised Burns that the RSL should no longer consider 'becoming political' because the Soldiers' National Political Party, which was a 'National Independent Non-Party Political Organization' of returned soldiers, 'the majority of whom are members of your Association', had been formed 'for the purpose of filling the gap left by other soldier organizations, so that the needs of soldiers and dependants could have full political expression'.⁷⁹ The Party's executive, Pimentel continued, believed that 'since this Party is in existence there is no necessity for the [RSL] becoming political, and the Executive also believe that such duplication of effort is unnecessary, and

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Pimentel to Burns, 24 May 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

would be disastrous to the best interests of returned soldiers and their dependants'.⁸⁰ Burns replied promptly, claiming not to comment 'either officially or otherwise'. The RSL, he argued, was comprised of men whose political beliefs were 'poles apart', but it was nevertheless a united body because of the 'fraternal feeling of comradeship' between members which worked 'for the general good quite apart from the political field'.⁸¹ 'I have quite an open mind personally as regards the merits or demerits of your proposition', he concluded, 'but am not in a position to offer any expression of opinion at present'.⁸²

Because the Returned Soldiers' National Political Party's ambition was to unite with the RSL and become its political wing, it criticised the RSL when it appeared to be too political. Late in 1918 the Party attacked national RSL president W.K. Bolton. In the lead up to a federal by-election at Corangamite in Victoria in December 1918, Nationalist Party supporters circulated a dodger advertising an address by their candidate and announcing that 'Senator

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Burns to Pimentel, 25 May 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

⁸² *ibid.*

Bolton, President of the Returned Soldiers' League', would also speak.⁸³ Pimentel saw the dodger and accused Bolton of allowing his position as RSL president to become associated with 'party political propaganda'. This was 'a fundamental violation of the League's Constitution', he said, 'and is a direct disregard of the feelings of the members who compose the League, and whose political opinions do not, in the main, coincide with those of Senator Bolton'.⁸⁴

Pimentel was not alone. In June 1918, J. O'Neill of the West Australian RSL told returned soldiers that 'Colonel Bolton was endeavouring to form a political body from the Returned Soldiers', and that Bolton 'was a strong conservative[,] so what could workmen who were also returned soldiers expect from people of that sort'.⁸⁵ When federal secretary W. Henderson asked for an explanation, O'Neill replied that he had been misreported, but his recollection of his statements was not the apology or disclaimer the federal body may have wanted. O'Neill claimed to have said:

⁸³ 'Corangamite Election', dodger enclosed in Pimentel to Henderson (gen sec RSL), 13 December 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

⁸⁴ Pimentel to Henderson, 13 December 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

⁸⁵ Henderson to O'Neill, 28 August 1918, NLA MS6609/2.

Col. Bolton is a member of the Federal Senate who today are a most Conservative Body. The Party whom Col Bolton supports are [sic] extremely so. That being so, how can Col Bolton serve two masters successfully and which class is getting the best deal from the Govt. whom Col Bolton supports[,] not the Workers. Not the Soldiers. But the merchants and others who do not sympathise with the Returned men or make any efforts to assist him in attaining his just rights ... If Col Bolton wishes to truly [sic] serve the Returned man it is his duty to 'mop up' the Win-the-War-Wasters, and all natural Enemies of the Dinkums. And once and for all, prove to the Soldiers his sincerity in their cause, which he has been so lacking in the past ...⁸⁶

The close association of prominent RSL members with the Nationalist Party led also to trouble with the unions. RSL support for conscription and unabated prosecution of the war had already aroused the hostility of many unions⁸⁷, and this was further inflamed by the threat returned soldiers posed to union rights of preference in employment. In South

⁸⁶ O'Neill to Henderson, 3 September 1918, NLA MS6609/2. The letter is under the official letterhead of the Perth branch, but it is unclear what position O'Neill held. He was not state president or secretary.

⁸⁷ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 14-15.

Australia the earliest mention of preference by the RSL was in July 1916, when it resolved that 'returned soldiers should be given preference on all works of a Public character, whether run by Government or Private concern, and that a clause dealing with this matter be inserted on all contract forms'.⁸⁸ The RSL used the issue of recruiting to reinforce its claims for preference for returned soldiers. When it heard in August 1916 that the New South Wales government had reaffirmed the principle of preference to unionists, the RSL protested that the government had discouraged recruiting and protected the economic position of the 'men who stay at home'.⁸⁹ The following day the South Australian Minister of Industry assured the state RSL branch that 'whatever was done elsewhere, in South Australia the Government would never support any proposal that a man who had gone and fought for his country should be forced to join a union before he was given work'.⁹⁰

The seriousness of the conflict between returned soldiers and unionists increased as more soldiers began to return to Australia

⁸⁸ Special General Meeting, 12 July 1916, 43, RSA Minute Book.

⁸⁹ *Advertiser*, 22 August 1916.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 23 August 1916.

after 1916 and started to compete on the labour market. By the end of December 1917 over 40,000 soldiers had been discharged throughout Australia, and of these about 46% had registered with the employment bureaux of the various state war councils.⁹¹ Returned soldiers began to clash violently with unionists. Broken Hill in particular was a source of constant trouble. The local RSL branch was often involved in these disputes, as for example in November 1918 when the *Advertiser* reported that

... crowds of men, organized by labor's volunteer army, held a street demonstration last night and a meeting outside Trades Hall. Most of the men wore the red ribbon. The speeches were chiefly condemnatory of certain members of the Returned Soldiers' Association. The Union Jack, which had flown on the Trades Hall, was pulled down during the evening.⁹²

In Fremantle the same month, the RSL held frequent meetings to discuss violence between members of the Lumpers' Union and returned soldiers working on the docks as 'National'

⁹¹ Pryor, 'Origins of Australia's Repatriation Policy', 52.

⁹² *Advertiser*, 16 November 1918.

waterside workers.⁹³ In Queensland, the Charters Towers RSL sub-branch suggested that the organisation should 'immediately become an Industrial Organization', because as 'in a great many works in the North employment is only obtained through the Union ... this necessitates our members becoming (forcibly) Members (in some cases) of organisation[s] whose Leaders and a great number of the Rank and File are antagonistic towards us'.⁹⁴

In South Australia, the RSL's attitude towards the union movement was demonstrated in its reaction to the Peace Day riot in Adelaide on 14 November 1918. That day had been declared a holiday to celebrate the signing of the Armistice, but was marred by violence between supporters of striking tram drivers and their opponents who attempted to run a volunteer tram service.⁹⁵ Some Adelaide citizens were quick to discern the influence on events of what was commonly labelled 'Bolshevism'. On the morning following Peace Day, an *Advertiser* correspondent asked,

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ P.B. MacPherson (sec Charters Towers RSL sub-branch) to W.A. Fisher (sec Queensland RSL), 9 December 1918, NLA MS6609/1/513.

⁹⁵ For a description of the events and their background, see David Hood, 'Adelaide's "First Taste of Bolshevism": Returned Soldiers and the 1918 Peace Day Riots', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, n. 15, 1987, 43-53.

'Well, South Australia, how do you like the taste of Bolshevism?', interpreting the apparently sudden action of tramway employees in refusing to work on 14 November as both a symptom of the current spirit of Bolshevism pervading society and as a trigger to the outbreak and spread of violence.⁹⁶ Many Australians drew similar conclusions in their search for explanations for the industrial and social convulsions which racked Australia in 1918 and 1919. The fear aroused by the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had introduced a new villain to the conservative catalogue of 'anti-war radicals and revolutionaries, anti-conscriptionists and Irish nationalists, pacifists, "shirkers" and strikers'⁹⁷, and after the war ended 'Bolshevik' replaced 'Hun' as the threat conservatives feared most. Analogies between the spread of Bolshevism and the spread of influenza were common. After riots in Brisbane in March 1919, for example, *Returned Soldier* complained that

Bolshevism seems to be giving the 'flu a go for it, as far as quick-spreading is concerned, and yet the same drastic steps are not taken to

⁹⁶ *Advertiser*, 15 November 1918.

⁹⁷ Evans, 'Some Furious Outbursts of Riot'..., 76-77.

check the spread of disloyalty as are taken to check the spread of the 'flu ... Both are pretty deadly, but of the two we are satisfied that Bolshevism will do the most harm in the long run.⁹⁸

Some conservatives believed that the introduction of 'Bolshevik sentiment' in Australia was the work of 'foreign' agitators, and feared that the large numbers of soldiers returning to Australia, while not themselves active agents of subversion, could be manipulated and exploited by disloyal elements in society.⁹⁹

The tramwaymen's strike was actually the culmination of months of protracted and unsuccessful negotiations between the South Australian branch of the Australian Tramway Employees' Association and the Adelaide Municipal Tramway Trust (MTT), and the strikers themselves played little part in the violence.¹⁰⁰ But conservatives were quick to note the participation of returned soldiers. The *Register* insisted that 'returned soldiers appeared to be the leading lights in the disturbance' and that 'khaki was in the

⁹⁸ *Returned Soldier*, 28 March 1919, 34.

⁹⁹ Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, 38-40, 237. See also Ward, *The War Generation*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Register*, 15 November 1918; *Advertiser*, 15 November 1918.

forefront of the riots'.¹⁰¹ The *Advertiser* commented on the large numbers of returned soldiers in the crowd and reported that many of them seemed to be prominent in assaults on volunteer tramwaymen.¹⁰² In contrast to these newspapers, which condemned returned soldiers for their apparent support of the strikers, or denied that such support was widespread, the *Daily Herald*, organ of the Labor Party in South Australia, upheld the link between returned soldier and unionist and supported both. It reported one soldier as having

complained bitterly against the Tramway Trust letting anyone work the trams ... it would be wise to stop that sort of thing before the boys came home. They were all unionists at the front fighting for a single cause, and they would not forget the union principles when they returned.¹⁰³

The RSL supported the conservative contention that the incident was not merely a spontaneous outbreak of violence associated with an industrial stoppage, but a manifestation of the sinister forces of

¹⁰¹ *Register*, 15 November 1918.

¹⁰² *Advertiser*, 15 November 1918.

¹⁰³ *Daily Herald*, 15 November 1918.

Bolshevism at work in society.¹⁰⁴ At a hastily convened meeting on 15 November the RSL state executive stated that the league was not connected or in sympathy with Bolshevism in any way and fully supported 'properly constituted authority which alone makes freedom possible'.¹⁰⁵ It moved quickly to dissociate its membership from any soldier involved in rioting. The RSL denied 'that returned soldiers as a body took the principal part' in the rioting, and drew attention to the 2,000 returned soldiers parading on the Adelaide Oval at the time and to veterans who had assisted women, children and invalids during the disturbances.¹⁰⁶ It also refuted reports that its members had anything to do with attacks on picture theatres.¹⁰⁷

The effect of the RSL's stand was to reinforce its association with conservatives. The law and order and anti-Bolshevik stand of conservatives was one with which the RSL leadership agreed in any case, but any stand less forceful would have undermined the position it had been cultivating as the one

¹⁰⁴ *Advertiser*, 16 November 1918.

¹⁰⁵ *Advertiser*, 16 November 1918. See also a letter from South Australian RSL secretary A.R.G. Fearby in the same issue.

¹⁰⁶ *R.S.A. Magazine*, December 1918, 7.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 8; *Advertiser*, 16 November 1918.

ex-service organisation truly representing returned soldiers and, more importantly, capable of controlling them.¹⁰⁸ State and federal governments had given the RSL considerable financial assistance in 1917 and 1918¹⁰⁹, but although the RSL believed that receiving government assistance conferred recognition, Hughes made it clear 'in very definite language that he did not think he had the right even if he had the power to delegate to [the] League or any other the sole power to represent the interests of returned soldiers'.¹¹⁰

The South Australian RSL's attempt after the Peace Day riots to present a united front to public and government was undermined when it became clear that not all its members supported the executive. At a lively meeting on 18 November, described by the *Advertiser* as 'the largest yet ... held', president A.S.

¹⁰⁸ For conservative concerns about returned soldiers and the importance of rewarding them 'quickly and "tangibly"', see Marilyn Lake, 'The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915-1938', PhD thesis, Monash University, 1984, 11.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example: Central Council, 5 September 1917, 11-12, Central Council Minutes; Repatriation Dept to Bolton, 11 March 1918, NLA MS6609/2; 'Assistance granted to various branches of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers' League by the different states', SRSA GRG 24/6/1149 (Premier's Dept P47/17); *SAPD*, 12 July 1917, 3; *Returned Soldier*, February 1918, 4.

¹¹⁰ Congress, 1 March 1918, 77, NLA MS6609/11.

Blackburn claimed that the RSL's role was not to take sides in the dispute, but that it was necessary to counter newspaper and public accusations that returned soldiers 'as a body were ringleaders in these disturbances'.¹¹¹ To his surprise, a voice 'from the back' claimed that the peace 'demonstrations' were 'not dishonourable' to the RSL. Lieutenant Walter Price, a future president of the state branch, replied that the RSL would be better off without members possessed of such sentiments, and the meeting continued amid frequent interjections.¹¹² Later in the evening an uproar occurred among members and 'one man was "counted out"'.¹¹³

The divisiveness at this meeting showed that a consequence of the RSL's support for the conservative interpretation of events on Peace Day was the increased suspicion and hostility of the labour movement. Sixty returned soldiers at the meeting were also members of the Tramway Employees' Association, and had been subjected to a series of thinly disguised attacks on their union's integrity for having 'caused' the trouble. They must have found little solace

¹¹¹ *Advertiser*, 19 November 1918; *R.S.A Magazine*, December 1918, 8-9.

¹¹² *Advertiser*, 19 November 1918.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

in the RSL executive's oft-repeated claim that it was not sitting in judgement on the union nor apportioning blame.¹¹⁴ In fact, at an earlier union meeting these same men had repudiated the RSL resolutions, claiming that such resolutions 'spoke for the executive and not the rank and file', and the union had declared its confidence in the 'members' (as opposed to the 'leadership') of the RSL.¹¹⁵

Relations between the RSL and the union deteriorated rapidly after the 18 November RSL meeting. Having supported the conservative interpretation of Peace Day events, the RSL executive threw aside any pretence of being non-party political. It reminded the public frequently that union secretary L.L. Hill was also president of the Anti-Conscription Council, and that as a Labor member of the House of Assembly he represented a party which had supported 'a shameful peace by negotiation, thus imperiling the future safety of the world'.¹¹⁶ For his part, Hill could not understand the RSL's inability to dissociate his union's industrial stand and his role as its secretary from his membership of the Labor Party and the Anti-Conscription

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 18 November 1918.

¹¹⁶ *R.S.A. Magazine*, December 1918, 8.

Council.¹¹⁷ But his reaction to the RSL's continued criticism ensured that the roles became still further enmeshed. In the House of Assembly on 21 November he said he regretted the RSL's attack on the union, and argued that the union had never had any quarrel with the RSL. Furthermore, it had not been union officers but the ordinary membership which had resolved to stop work, and by an overwhelming majority.¹¹⁸ On the same day the Labor Party Council officially entered the fracas when it released a statement condemning the RSL's attack on Hill and questioning the validity of the RSL's claim to be 'non-sectarian and non-political'.¹¹⁹

The issue was further complicated by rumours that the RSL had promised to supply men to fill vacancies left by Tramway employees who had been dismissed by the MTT after the strike.¹²⁰ Trouble had been foreshadowed by an *Advertiser* correspondent, who on 18 November supported the MTT's action

¹¹⁷ He had acknowledged the link between party and union when he claimed in 1916 that 'the Tramways Association had inaugurated the [anti-conscription] campaign' (*Register*, 29 September 1916).

¹¹⁸ *Advertiser*, 22 November 1918.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ C.R. Moyes (sec MTT) to T. Jewell (fed sec Tramway Employees' Association), 14 November 1918, SRSA GRG 22/57/1374; *Advertiser*, 15 November 1918.

in dismissing 'absentee' employees and suggested that the MTT 'should employ soldiers who are loyal, and even train women for the work'. Labor MPs claimed that Attorney-General Henry Barwell, who was acting as mediator between the MTT and the union, had first suggested that the MTT hire unemployed returned soldiers.¹²¹ At the 18 November RSL meeting Blackburn strenuously denied that the RSL had offered members for employment.¹²² Barwell explained later in Parliament that the matter of supplying returned soldiers had actually arisen in a conference between the MTT and the union, when he had said that 'he understood that some returned soldiers might be obtained to fill vacancies - certainly not all the vacancies, or sufficient to establish a service, but merely that it had been stated that some [RSL] men would be available'.¹²³ When Labor members suggested that the spectre of volunteer labour had been raised to bluff union representatives, Barwell was saved further embarrassment by the Speaker, who objected to such a suggestion on the doubtful grounds that it constituted an attack on a

¹²¹ *Advertiser*, 18 November 1918.

¹²² *ibid.*, 19 November 1918.

¹²³ *SAPD*, 21 November 1918, 1412-1413.

judge of the Industrial Court.¹²⁴ This marked the end of public conflict between the union and the RSL without any real resolution of it.

Other disturbances involving returned soldiers occurred throughout Australia around this time, and in each instance the various RSL state branches responded individually rather than as parts of a united federal organisation.¹²⁵ While the response was usually anti-Bolshevik in sentiment, the intensity of the reaction depended on the character of these state branches and the local political situation at the time. For example, the RSL's reaction in Brisbane to disturbances in March 1919 was particularly vehement because it thought that the state Labor government was tacitly encouraging Bolshevism through its reluctance to take firm measures against militant groups within that state.¹²⁶ The South Australian RSL

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 1413.

¹²⁵ See, for example, D.W. Rawson, 'Political Violence in Australia', *Dissent*, n. 22, August 1968, 18-25; Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, 38-39; B.K. DeGaris, 'An Incident in Fremantle', *Labour History*, n. 10, 1966, 32-37; Moore, '"Send Lawyers, Guns and Money!"...', 90; Seggie, 'Right-wing Extremism in Australia 1919-1933', 9-37.

¹²⁶ Evans, '"Some Furious Outbursts of Riot" ...', 77; Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, 163-165; Seggie, 'Right-wing Extremism in Australia, 1919-1933', 23; *Advertiser*, 15 April 1919.

supported the Queensland RSL's action in condemning its state government, and noted that while 'any defiance of constituted authority' was 'deplorable', 'tacit encouragement o[r] permission by the Government of seditious and disloyal utterances or actions may necessitate measures by loyal citizens to ensure quelling such actions that are a menace to civil peace'.¹²⁷ After violence involving returned soldiers in Fremantle, the West Australian RSL resolved, after much debate and unrest among members, that the association stood for 'properly constituted law and order' but could not 'take sides with one body of returned soldiers against another'.¹²⁸

Despite such differences, the major problem was common to the RSL at both state and federal levels. The organisation had not yet hammered out a viable political policy. Those who insisted that issues could be separated into the 'national' and the 'political' faced the problem of definition. Their adversaries believed that the RSL should dispense with such niceties and declare itself overtly political, but they

¹²⁷ R.G. Woodhead (asst sec SA RSL) to A.D.K. Morris (a/g gen sec RSL), 15 April 1919, NLA MS6609/2.

¹²⁸ *Advertiser*, 5-8 May 1919.

too were wary of alienating thousands of potential members who could make the difference between the RSL's flourishing or foundering. Neither group had achieved a clear victory on any issue by mid-1919. In many instances the RSL's attitudes toward the war and the values for which it was being fought made it impossible for the organisation to be politically neutral, and precluded the luxury of calm debate on definitions of 'national' or 'political'. Domestic unrest and violence in times of peace presented the same problem. It was difficult enough for the RSL to achieve political neutrality in the highly politicised environment of postwar Australia, and violence made it more so. There could be no place for normality in such abnormal times. The RSL may have been struggling towards defining itself as a 'pressure group', but this could not be achieved while the war continued. The same was true of Australian society in general. In the eyes of conservatives, labour unrest in time of war was not simply labour unrest but a threat to the war effort and tantamount to disloyalty. When this unrest was accompanied by violence, conservatives found it even easier to draw such conclusions. Not until 1919, when the

war had ended, could most conservatives, while never forgetting the Labor Party's war record, again look upon it as simply a mainstream Australian political party, not a hotbed of disloyalists threatening Australia's survival. The same was true of the union movement. The issue of preference in employment continued to be a source of contention between the RSL and the unions - in fact, more so - after the war, but at least this could be debated in a climate in which conservatives could no longer readily equate 'unionist' with 'disloyalist'. Conservatives were quick to replace the threat from Germany with that from 'Bolshevism', but war's end did point the way back to some degree of normality.

Chapter 4

'A great many temptations for men in a neutral position'

After the war, the RSL moved away from its association with the Nationalist Party and strove to give credibility to its claim to be 'non party political'. Two things made this possible. First, the political climate of Australia began to change after the Armistice. With Germany's defeat, it was no longer necessary to debate how to wage war against it. Second, while the bitterness and divisiveness of the war could not easily be forgotten, most civilians wanted to turn their backs on the war and get on with the present, except perhaps on special occasions such as Anzac Day. The RSL continued to wage the war in some areas, such as seeking to have 'disloyalists' and 'eligibles' dismissed from the public service, but in other areas it recognised that it had to look beyond the war towards the welfare of its members, and towards increasing its membership.

One indication of the degree of recognition the RSL had achieved by mid-1919 is the way in which delegates to its July 1919 national congress in Adelaide were

feted. Delegates attended a mayoral reception at the Adelaide Town Hall, a Government House lunch tendered by governor Sir Henry Galway, and a Parliament House lunch as guests of E.A. Anstey, Commissioner of Crown Lands and Minister of Repatriation.¹ Another indication is the number of official and semi-official bodies on which RSL members sat. In South Australia, for example, these included the Federal Repatriation Board, State War Council, State Repatriation Committee, State Employment Committee, and Land Settlement Committee.² Technically, however, members were 'soldier' representatives, not RSL representatives, and throughout 1919 the League continued to strive for direct representation on all state boards and district repatriation committees.³

The government's interest in and recognition of the RSL was prompted in part by the organisation's rapidly growing membership. In May 1918 the South Australian RSL claimed that 90% of the 3,500 returned soldiers in the state had joined⁴, and by June it boasted 2,359 financial and 902

¹ Program, 15 July 1919, Central Council Minutes, n.p.

² *R.S.A. Magazine*, April 1919, 1.

³ See, for example, Central Council, 4 June 1919, 29, Central Council Minutes.

⁴ *Returned Soldier*, 21 May 1918, 59.

unfinancial members with a further 950 belonging to twelve sub-branches.⁵ By the end of 1918 there were 5,004 financial and unfinancial RSL members throughout the state, including those in sixteen sub-branches.⁶ This was a healthy membership even before the great leap in numbers that occurred in 1919. Kristianson believes that 'the bulk of the 167,000 men who had been overseas when the armistice was called' joined the RSL in 1919⁷, and by October of that year there were 17,200 financial members and sixty sub-branches throughout South Australia and 115,200 members and 615 sub-branches nationally.⁸

The RSL's growth in 1919 put new pressures on its constitution, which had been adopted under very different circumstances at the League's first national congress in September 1916. Under this constitution, the annual congress was, in theory, the RSL's ultimate governing body, with states represented equally.⁹ General control of the

⁵ A.R.G. Fearby (sec SA RSL) to W. Henderson (gen sec RSL), 4 July 1918, NLA MS6609/10.

⁶ *Advertiser*, 21 January 1919.

⁷ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 26.

⁸ Report of the Conference of State Secretaries, 3 November 1919, 6, NLA MS6609/11.

⁹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 109-110. New South Wales, which favoured

RSL rested with a central council comprising a president elected at the preceding congress, two members from each state organisation also elected at congress, and one representative elected from and by each of the state branches who was called 'vice-president'.¹⁰ The central council was chaired by the federal president and met bi-monthly.¹¹ In May 1918 a constitutional revision committee found that the central council's size impaired its efficiency¹², and recommended that a federal executive be created comprising one representative from each state branch and a president.¹³ The federal executive operated simultaneously with the central council until the latter was abolished in 1919.¹⁴

The relative powers of the federal executive, representing the state branches, and the president were not really tested until May 1919. That month national president Colonel W.K. Bolton responded to a crippling

proportional representation, did not affiliate until 1917.

¹⁰ Constitution, August 1916, Central Council Minutes, n.p.

¹¹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 110.

¹² *ibid.*, 111.

¹³ Report of the Revisionary Committee to the Central Council, 9 May 1918, 2, Central Council Minutes.

¹⁴ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 111.

seamen's strike by issuing a 'manifesto' which brought him into direct conflict with the executive. 'Bolton's manifesto', as it was called, stated that:

In order to protect our League and its members from the obvious intrigues of disloyal extremists under cover of industrial strife, your President deems it advisable to again emphasise the necessity for all members to strictly abstain from active participation in any industrial dispute, and invites your co-operation to this end. All genuine returned soldiers who fought for the liberty, freedom, and the welfare of our people without class distinction or class hatred, will support constitutional authority in maintaining law and order and the protection of life and property.¹⁵

This statement led to the federal executive's raising specific questions about both the relationship between the executive and the national president, and the role of politics in the RSL. At a 4 June 1919 executive meeting, West Australian representative E.W. Corboy argued that all League manifestos should be issued by the federal executive,

¹⁵ Central Council, 4 June 1919, 22, Central Council Minutes.

not the president.¹⁶ Bolton disagreed, claiming that the president had certain executive powers between federal executive meetings and 'to that extent ... represents the federal executive of the League'.¹⁷ He claimed that his manifesto was in essence no different than that the federal executive had issued in December 1918, which had stated that 'this responsible and representative body of the great mass of returned soldiers throughout Australia, takes the earliest opportunity of publicly expressing its unswerving determination to secure by all constitutional means in its power those reforms of government administration which may be necessary in all matters relating to the interest and welfare of returned soldiers and their dependants'.¹⁸

But Bolton's manifesto was different. By his reckoning, Bolshevik subversion underlay all industrial strife. Although state branches such as Queensland may have agreed¹⁹, others did not, or at least were undecided. In Western Australia, for example, as Corboy pointed out, the state RSL had supported striking returned soldiers because

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 21-23.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ See, for example, Rawson, 'Political Violence in Australia', 19-21.

an armed force had been led against them. 'If we had declared ourselves in favour of law and order', Corboy said, 'it would have meant that we were in favour of the application of an armed force against our comrades'.²⁰ The closest the South Australian branch had come to Bolton's comments had been its statement after the November 1918 Tramway riots, when it had declared itself 'wholeheartedly on the side of ... properly constituted authority'.²¹ This was still a far cry from linking Bolshevism with all industrial disturbance. Blackburn, state Nationalist MP, agreed with Corboy, federal Labor MP, that Bolton's comments were too severe. Both believed that the RSL had to distance itself from the federal president's statements.²²

It was no easy matter to decide upon a statement which would convince the public and disgruntled members that the RSL did not believe in taking sides in industrial disputes. Such a statement could not directly contradict Bolton's manifesto because this would advertise the RSL's internal problems and compromise Bolton personally. After

²⁰ Central Council, 4 June 1919, 21-23, Central Council Minutes. See also DeGaris, 'An Incident in Fremantle', 35-36.

²¹ *Advertiser*, 16 November 1918.

²² Central Council, 4 June 1919, 24-25, Central Council Minutes.

discussion, Blackburn moved successfully that the RSL dissociate itself from taking sides in any industrial disputes but declare itself absolutely opposed to 'the introduction of collectivism by violent means'.²³ By avoiding any prohibition on state branch involvement in industrial disputes, while at the same time making clear that the RSL opposed disloyalty and violence, the federal executive allowed state branches enough autonomy to maintain RSL unity, and neatly sidestepped the politics question.

The federal executive attempted to consolidate its constitutional position at the July 1919 national congress. This meeting resolved that the attitude of each branch, sub-branch, and district branch of the League would be subject to a manifesto issued from time to time by the federal executive.²⁴ When it came to Bolton's politics, Victorian delegate G.R. Palmer worried that, if the RSL took sides in industrial matters and disputes, it would find itself torn by 'disruption and destruction'. Eighty percent of the AIF were 'industrialists' and unionists, he told delegates, and added that 70,000 returned soldiers belonged to the

²³ *ibid.*, 24-25.

²⁴ Congress, 18 July 1919, n.p., Central Council Minutes; *Advertiser*, 22 July 1919.

AWU.²⁵ The meeting shunned any motion smacking of political involvement, even when couched in the familiar rhetoric of 'independent of party'. For example, a motion that the RSL 'take a definite political attitude in State and Federal Parliaments independent of Party' was defeated by a large majority²⁶, congress resolving instead that the RSL should be defined as 'national, non-partisan, and non-sectarian'.²⁷

Congress also dumped Bolton, but only just. The grounds on which this was based were foreshadowed by debate on an early motion that no member of Parliament could hold an official position in the RSL.²⁸ Almost immediately Tasmanian proxy delegate Lee proposed an amendment that this should be no official position on the federal executive of the RSL.²⁹ Opposing the motion, delegate Bowers commented that he had 'been agreeably surprised at this Congress at the attitude adopted by the politicians in it' and, referring to delegates Corboy (federal Labor) and Blackburn (state Nationalist), Bowers continued:

²⁵ *Returned Soldier*, 18 July 1919, 5.

²⁶ Congress, 21 July 1919, 3, Central Council Minutes.

²⁷ *Advertiser*, 22 July 1919.

²⁸ Congress, 16 July 1919, 374, NLA MS6609/3.

²⁹ *ibid.*

They have sat around this Congress table and their deliberations are in keeping with ours, and never once have I heard either Mr Corboy or Mr Blackburn say anything that would suggest any party influence. I am proud to be associated with these gentlemen.³⁰

One delegate thought that it was a 'funny question', asking 'how is a soldier going to get into Parliament at present without being with one party or the other?'.³¹ Lee explained that he believed that the RSL president should not belong to or be directly associated with any political party. He added that his proposed amendment did not apply to officials in state branches, and explained that 'when you have one official "king" or president of any organisation, he must be to the greatest extent possible in his position independent of any particular party'.³²

When a delegate pointed out that both the motion and amendment involved altering the constitution and could not be carried unless one month's notice was given to all state branches, Lee moved instead that 'it be an expression of opinion by this Congress that the Federal President of the League

³⁰ *ibid.*, 375.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, 376.

should not be a party politician'.³³

Referring to Bolton's activities in the Corangamite by-election, Lee said:

Concerning that election [Bolton] said that what he was doing was his private business, and that he was there as a friend [of the Nationalist candidate], but he was reported in nearly every paper in Victoria as the President of the Returned Soldiers' League. Hand bills were handed out ... I presume not with the authority of the President, but by the manoeuvre of party organisers - that the President of our League would speak in support of their candidate. It gave the impression that we were supporting a non-returned soldier against a returned soldier. A man in the position of President of this League must be prepared to foreswear a lot of things.³⁴

A large part of the problem was that Bolton was not simply a party politician, but a Nationalist. It was certainly true that a disproportionate number of those ex-soldiers entering politics did so as representatives of the conservative parties. In April 1918 state elections in South Australia, only two soldiers were returned to Parliament: A.S.

³³ *ibid.*, 378.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 379.

Blackburn for the Nationalist Party and W.J. Denny (the sitting member, re-elected while on active service) for the Labor Party.³⁵ But at federal level by 1920, nineteen returned soldier MPs belonged to the Nationalist Party, three to the Country Party, and none to the Labor Party.³⁶

Lee's motion that the constitution be amended to prohibit a party politician from occupying the office of RSL president was

³⁵ Howard Coxon, John Playford and Robert Reid, *Biographical Register of the South Australian Parliament 1857-1957*, Adelaide, 1985. Denny was elected to the South Australian House of Assembly in 1900 and remained there until 1933. He enlisted in the AIF in August 1915 at the age of 42, was severely wounded at Ypres in September 1917, was awarded the Military Cross, and reached the rank of captain. Author of the book *The diggers* and an autobiography *A digger at home and abroad*, Denny was a minister in the 1924-27 Gunn-Hill government (including Minister for Repatriation) and the 1930-33 Hill government. He was expelled from the Labor Party in 1931 for supporting the Premiers' Plan. Arch-conservative South Australian governor Sir Tom Bridges described him in 1926 as 'a rather common bullying type of Irish lawyer who, without high standing in his profession, has certain ability'. A contrasting description is that of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which notes that Denny's integrity, versatility and wide knowledge were 'unquestioned'. He appears never to have joined the RSL. (P.A. Howell, 'More Varieties of Vice-Regal Life', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, n.9 (1981), 43-44; *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 8, 287-288.)

³⁶ *Biographical Handbook and Record of Elections for the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne, 1926; Joan Rydon, *A Biographical Register of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1901-1972*, Canberra, 1975.

lost, but it did not save Bolton. In a vote for president, G.J.C. Dyett from Victoria defeated Bolton sixteen votes to fourteen. Lee, proxy delegate for Tasmanian delegates unable to attend because of a shipping strike³⁷, cast five votes.³⁸ Bolton's opponents were blunt in their analysis of the result. 'The retiring president', said Queensland delegate Hutton, 'had been in the unfortunate position of being in politics'.³⁹ Victorian delegate Palmer was a little more tactful, noting that 'the Victorian branch had come to the conclusion that Senator Bolton's time was too much taken up by his Parliamentary and other duties, and that the League had suffered in consequence'.⁴⁰ Replying to the usual motions of past appreciation, Bolton admitted that his connection with politics had represented a problem. He maintained, however, that he had not entered Parliament as a political nominee or agent of returned soldiers but as RSL president to represent the League 'in the only possible way that they could be represented at the time'.⁴¹

³⁷ Congress, 15 July 1919, 1, NLA MS6609/12.

³⁸ Congress, 18 July 1919, n.p., Central Council Minutes.

³⁹ *Advertiser*, 19 July 1919.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

Not all delegates were prepared to allow the presidential election to rest with expressions of appreciation or clichéd murmurs of satisfaction or regret. After Dyett's election, New South Wales delegate Meeks questioned the election's validity, and South Australian A.H. Teece, seconding a motion of appreciation to Bolton, implied that Lee had been bribed by the Victorian delegates to vote for Dyett.⁴² A few days' adjournment did nothing to cool tempers. When on 21 July West Australian delegate Donnelly said that having a party politician as president had not been in the RSL's best interests, Teece threatened 'to take his coat off' because he objected to 'a lot of personalities' being introduced.⁴³ The same day New South Wales delegates withdrew from congress, claiming that they wanted to report to their state executive as soon as possible.⁴⁴ Blackburn immediately announced that, after seeking legal advice, he believed that the presidential election had been unconstitutional. He claimed that the RSL's constitution laid down that delegates had to

⁴² *ibid.* There are no further references to this charge and the matter appears to have been allowed to drop.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 22 July 1919.

⁴⁴ Congress, 21 July 1919, 248-9, NLA MS6609/3.

be full members of the state branch which they represented, which Lee, as proxy member for Tasmania, was not.⁴⁵ Blackburn threatened to challenge the election in court, a move he believed would forestall and 'kill every effort on the part of the State branches to secede and break the League'.⁴⁶

When Lee attacked Blackburn for his 'extreme and partisan' attitude, Blackburn replied that

his desire was to keep the league united and [to keep] it going on a proper constitutional footing. He was very far from being alone in the matter. He had been stopped in the street by South Australian members, who had told him things were being done unconstitutionally, and had suggested drawing out if the league was not going on constitutional lines.⁴⁷

He explained that he would take any legal action as an individual RSL member, not as president of the South Australian branch nor as congress delegate. He had been accused of being partisan, he continued, because his action was directed against Dyett. This was

⁴⁵ *Advertiser*, 22 July 1919.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 23 July 1919.

not because of any personal animosity towards Dyett, he assured delegates, but simply because he could not proceed against the RSL because it was not a registered body. The writ he contemplated would ask the court to restrain Dyett from acting as federal RSL president.⁴⁸ The South Australian RSL executive endorsed Blackburn's proposed actions a few days later.⁴⁹

Blackburn had been among those federal executive representatives who had agreed in June that Bolton's manifesto had been too partisan and had threatened the RSL's unity, and that the best way of avoiding this in the future was to ensure that manifestos were issued by the federal executive, not the president. Blackburn's subsequent actions indicate that not all federal executive representatives agreed that this meant that Bolton was an unsuitable president, or that having a Nationalist Senator as president was necessarily a bad thing. This view found some support at congress, where South Australian and New South Wales delegates obviously felt that, as long as Bolton avoided extreme comments, some RSL association with conservative politics did not threaten RSL

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ SA RSL Executive Committee, 25 July 1919, 1, NLA MS6609/10.

unity. Blackburn, with his ties to the Nationalist party, may have considered a conservative orientation a good thing, and that Bolton's influence was critical in ensuring that the RSL did not swing the other way. Besides, having the question of Bolton's presidency tied up with the question of party politicians in RSL executive positions left Blackburn little choice but to fight for Bolton's retention. While the other prominent party politician in the federal executive, West Australian state Labor MP E.W. Corboy, was not an executive officer in that state RSL branch, Blackburn was South Australian president.

Congress was distracted from these proceedings by reports of violent confrontations in Melbourne between returned soldiers and police. On 15 July some Melbourne veterans took part in a demonstration by the unemployed, and several had been injured by police. A few days later ex-servicemen and police clashed after a group of soldiers and sailors attacked Victoria Barracks and attempted to release prisoners. The Victorian RSL protested to the Police Commissioner about the treatment of ex-soldiers by police, and a procession marched on the state offices where cabinet

was in session. The crowd became rowdy and Victorian premier H.S.W. Lawson was assaulted. Returned soldiers fought with police, and later several policemen were injured in a demonstration near police headquarters.⁵⁰

RSL delegates to the Adelaide congress were shocked by these disturbances. The need to present a united front, forgotten among the acrimony of internal politicking, now seemed imperative. Lee withdrew a motion censuring Blackburn because he felt that 'a number of soldiers [who] had decided that now the Armistice [sic] was over ... were going to take a certain line of action' might be encouraged to do so if they thought the RSL was squabbling.⁵¹ Blackburn agreed to delay his intended action, and congress resolved that it viewed 'with regret the recent disturbance in Melbourne, and desires to convey to the residents of Australia that our league stands only for constitutional methods, and refutes any action of terrorism'.⁵² The Victorian branch, which had organised the deputation to the premier on the occasion on which he had been assaulted,

⁵⁰ Rawson, 'Political Violence in Australia', 22.

⁵¹ *Advertiser*, 23 July 1919.

⁵² *ibid.*

explained that 'the League took full constitutional measures, but the larrikin element got out of hand', and congress resolved to accept that explanation.⁵³

Uncertainty over the presidential election continued after congress disbanded. In August *Returned Soldier* criticised Blackburn's efforts to upset Dyett's election, and supported Dyett as a 'dinkum' who would help the RSL avoid party politics. Bolton, it said,

is a Tory politician, whose partisan utterings at the commencement of the [seamen's] strike settled his chance of re-election. The returned men are well advised when they pass over politicians when choosing their executive officers.⁵⁴

This was the same *Returned Soldier* which had cried earlier that year that 'without politics the RSL is like a ship without a rudder'⁵⁵, and was certainly no friend of the Labor Party.⁵⁶ It too now realised that the climate had changed, and that the RSL could now no longer have such a direct association

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Returned Soldier*, 15 August 1919, 16.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 6 June 1919, 31.

⁵⁶ See, for example, *Returned Soldier*, 25 June 1918, 15, 30 September 1918, 4, 3 January 1919, 5.

with a conservative politician. But the South Australian and New South Wales branches stubbornly refused to give up the fight for Bolton. When a federal executive meeting was scheduled for early September, these branches feared that it would be used to censure their opposition and confirm Dyett as president. The New South Wales executive sent a telegram to Blackburn urging 'immediate action' and promising support.⁵⁷ It also resolved to warn federal acting general secretary A.P.K. Morris that the branch was seeking legal advice on congress's validity, and that it was sending a representative to the federal executive 'without prejudice to that position'.⁵⁸ When the issue arose at the federal executive meeting, however, the South Australian and New South Wales branches backed down, and the executive unanimously upheld its confidence in Dyett and recommended that state branches contemplating legal action should abandon that course.⁵⁹

When Dyett addressed congress as president for the first time in 1920, he

⁵⁷ Unidentified and undated newspaper clipping report of New South Wales executive meeting, 29 August 1919, NLA MS6609/1/871.

⁵⁸ A.G. Potter (sec NSW RSL) to A.P.K. Morris (a/gen sec RSL), 29 August 1919, NLA MS6609/1/871.

⁵⁹ Federal Executive, 9 September 1919, NLA MS6609/1/992.

promised not to make 'extensive reference' to the controversy surrounding his election. He did refer to 'certain remarks' from delegates at the preceding congress, but hoped that 'by virtue of your experience of my attitude, and with the opportunity of judging my general conduct, those misrepresentations and inaccurate statements would be expelled from your minds'. In reply, Blackburn accepted 'such blame as there is' for the 'regrettable' incidents at the 1919 congress. He explained that he had acted in what he thought at the time to be the best interests of the League, but which he now knew were not so. He concluded:

At the last Congress I was proud to express the views I then did, but I am even more proud to express the views I do today. I congratulate you on taking another term of office, and I can assure you from South Australia the most complete loyalty, and every scrap of assistance we can possibly give.⁶⁰

Installing and accepting a new president did not solve all the RSL's problems. The federal executive, interpreting Bolton's

⁶⁰ Congress, 27 April 1920, 6-7, NLA MS6609/11.

manifesto as a challenge to its authority and a threat to RSL unity, believed that the state branches should have some leeway within the RSL's federal structure, but wanted to control this by vetting all state and sub-branch requests, complaints and resolutions. Bolton's opponents used the 'no-politics' stand as a weapon with which to break the power of an autocrat who exercised too much restraint over state branches, but once that power was broken they did not envisage that the executive would become subservient to a decentralised structure. Instead, the federal executive, representing the states, wanted to fill the vacuum left by the erosion of the president's powers.

This process had started during Bolton's presidency and with his co-operation. In April 1919 the RSL general secretary had written to federal government departments about centralising the League's pressure group activities. 'The President desires me to say', he wrote,

that he has noticed on several occasions that Branches have approached various departmental heads with matters which affect generally the policy of this League as a Federal Organisation and he feels

that such matters should in future be dealt with by this Office and therefore requests you to be kind enough to refer same before dealing with them.⁶¹

The Home and Territories Department agreed outright to the request, and the Prime Minister's Department promised to give the matter 'attention'.⁶² 1919 congress confirmed this policy, with delegates resolving that

each State Branch shall have the power to make rules not inconsistent with the Constitution and Objects of the League, for the internal government of the Branch and Districts or Sub-Branches. A State, Sub- or District Branch shall not without previously consulting the [Federal] Executive take any action on any matter calculated to prejudicially affect the League and the decision of the [federal executive] shall be final and binding on such Branch, Sub-Branch or District Branch.⁶³

The federal executive's moves to secure its independence from the president, while

⁶¹ A.P.K. Morris (a/gen sec RSL) to Lt Col. W. Logan, 30 April 1919, NLA MS6609/10.

⁶² Home and Territories Department to Morris, 10 April 1919, Prime Minister's Department to Morris, 14 April 1919, NLA MS6609/1/335.

⁶³ Congress, 18 July 1919, n.p., Central Council Minutes.

restricting the states by channelling their motions through the central body, received a major setback late in 1919 when state branches became embroiled in conflict over the question of a war gratuity for ex-servicemen. The possibility of a gratuity was first raised in mid-1919, but the issue did not gain momentum until the federal election campaign later that year. Both the Nationalists and the Labor Party made strenuous efforts to woo the votes of returned soldiers. The Labor Party promised a cash gratuity, whereas Hughes, meeting with the federal executive on numerous occasions in September and October, offered a non-negotiable, interest bearing bond scheme. The federal executive and Hughes then worked a deal. Hughes was to acknowledge the RSL's role in formulating the scheme in return for the RSL's support for the scheme in the forthcoming election campaign.⁶⁴

Many veterans were dissatisfied with Hughes's scheme, favouring instead the payment of a cash gratuity.⁶⁵ Hughes planned to open the Nationalist election campaign in Adelaide on 10 November, and offered to talk

⁶⁴ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 21-23; *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 December 1919, 11-13.

⁶⁵ See, for example, *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 December, 11-13, 21.

to returned soldiers about the war gratuity at a separate meeting. The South Australian RSL executive, while supporting Hughes's scheme, refused to convene the meeting for fear that its involvement might be construed as general support for Hughes, and compromise the branch politically.⁶⁶ Instead, a private individual, Sergeant Stephens, organised the meeting. Stephens opened proceedings by criticising the RSL executive for its absence, and called for its 'censure'.⁶⁷ The following day the RSL executive inserted a large advertisement in the daily newspapers explaining its position. 'The Constitution of the League', the advertisement stated, 'which was approved and passed by a "General Meeting of the League" within the last few weeks, states definitely that it is "Non Party political"'. When the state president was asked to call a meeting of returned soldiers, it continued, 'he had to decline to do so or else deliberately break the Constitution'. It also contended that if the president had officially called a meeting to hear Hughes he would have had to do the same to hear Labor leader Frank Tudor or any other politician.⁶⁸ Responding to criticisms that it had been of

⁶⁶ *Advertiser*, 11 November 1919.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

no assistance to soldiers over the war gratuity issue, the state executive announced that 'as a matter of fact, the South Australian Representative on the Federal Executive asked for the very thing which the Prime Minister now announces, viz., that the Banks should be allowed to advance Cash on the Bonds'. It continued that this representative, A.H. Teece, had tabled a resolution to this effect at the last federal executive meeting.⁶⁹

The debate over the war gratuity reflected the dilemma of many veterans, RSL members or not, who supported Hughes but were strongly attracted to the prospect of a cash gratuity. *Returned Soldier* backed the rival RSL faction which called for the cash war gratuity, but clearly wanted soldiers to receive this from Hughes, not the Labor Party.⁷⁰ But it considered the cost of support for a cash payment to be too high if there was any possibility of a Labor victory in the election. In November 1919 it commented that 'even if all the members of the Parliamentary Labor Party agreed to pay the gratuity, they will have to take their

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Returned Soldier*, 7 November 1919, 2.

orders from their bosses in the junta outside', and continued that

these bosses have been consistently against the soldiers, and have never supported them in any shape or form. They are against preference to the soldiers, and they support the men who referred to them as six bob-a-day murderers.⁷¹

It had been even more forthright a few days earlier:

There is no conceivable alternative to a Hughes Ministry. A gentleman named Ryan is raising considerable dust in the Eastern States, but the country is in no mood to entrust the reins of government to a shabby crew of pacifists, who in the closing stages of the war wanted to put recruiting to the vote and were willing to make peace with an unwhipped Germany on the basis of no annexations and no indemnities.⁷²

Hughes was well aware of this opinion and the advantage it gave him with the RSL. But he was reluctant to embark on any course which might alienate the soldier vote, and this included direct confrontation with the

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 2.

⁷² *ibid.*, 31 October 1919, 6.

RSL.⁷³ Although he attempted to tread a path between official and unofficial RSL demands, he nevertheless found himself involved in a widely-publicised dispute with Dyett. When Hughes was reported as telling returned soldiers to bypass the RSL's executive with suggestions about the war gratuity, Dyett responded immediately. The Prime Minister, he said,

evidently influenced by certain demonstrations and perhaps disappointed that the executive had strenuously maintained neutrality in regard to political affairs, has seen fit to express words calculated to disparage the league, whose membership is nearly 150,000, and which has nearly 700 sub-branches throughout Australia. What justification Mr Hughes has for deliberately advising the soldiers to go direct to him with their complaints is not known, unless it is to convert a non-party, non-political, and non-sectarian organization into a party machine.⁷⁴

Hughes immediately protested that 'condensed press reports' of the speech in question had misrepresented his position. He denied that

⁷³ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 20-22.

⁷⁴ *Register*, 12 November 1919.

he had criticised the federal executive, and claimed instead that he had said that 'our relations were, and have been throughout the conferences I had with them, most harmonious'.⁷⁵

This exchange, and the well-publicised nature of the entire issue, ensured a large attendance at the next meeting organised by the South Australian RSL on 17 November. Although described as 'animated'⁷⁶, the hostility of the previous meeting towards the RSL executive was absent. Hughes's affirmation of 'friendly' ties with the RSL federal executive, the liberalisation of cash gratuity conditions, the state RSL's rapid response to criticism, and fear that continued demands might damage Hughes electorally, combined to stifle dissenting voices. The meeting resolved, by an 'overwhelming majority', to uphold 'the action of the executive in connection with the gratuity'.⁷⁷ It also resolved that 'the gratuity be paid in cash or bonds, according to the wish of the soldier concerned'.⁷⁸

As for Dyett, he told the RSL's next congress in April 1920:

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 13 November 1919.

⁷⁶ *Advertiser*, 18 November 1919.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

My attitude during the elections, and particularly during the unpleasant controversy which occurred with the Prime Minister, which was forced upon me, was absolutely neutral. I can justly claim that no expression of mine could warrant the allegation that I was inclined toward any particular party.⁷⁹

Claiming that the RSL had 'persisted in maintaining a course of strict neutrality', he continued:

During the last election we went through a most critical time. It was a bitter fight between two parties seeking a return to power, but despite many temptations, I was fortunately able to steer a clear path. It was not because temptations were not thrown in my way. There were a great many temptations for men in a neutral position. But I realised that I was the chosen leader of a body of men who had fought side by side on many foreign battlefields, and that their views being in unity on certain points, it was my bounden duty to protect the interests of the League by [staying] clear of party politics.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Congress, 27 April 1920, 2, NLA MS6609/11.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 2.

1919 was a successful year for the League, despite the acrimony surrounding Dyett's election and the controversy over the war gratuity. At the beginning of 1920, as Kristianson has noted, the League held 'an undisputed position as Australia's major ex-service body'.⁸¹ But although Dyett remained League president until 1946, his popularity with state branches fluctuated. He was subject to many presidential challenges, some of which he won by the narrowest of margins. An examination of Dyett's career, and of the basis of the challenges he faced during the first fifteen years of his presidency, provides an insight into the character of the League and of the significance of Dyett's initial electoral victory in 1919.

Gilbert Joseph Cullen Dyett was born in Victoria in 1891, the son of a blacksmith. After an education by the Marist Brothers at Bendigo, he worked for an estate agent and ran a number of his own business ventures. In South Africa at the outbreak of war, he returned to Australia, undertook officer training, and was commissioned as a lieutenant in the 7th Battalion in March 1915. Severely injured at Lone Pine on

⁸¹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 23.

Gallipoli in August, he was repatriated to Australia and headed the local recruiting campaign in Bendigo. In May 1917 he was appointed secretary of Victorian State Recruiting Committee with promotion to temporary captain. He was an avowed voluntarist but believed strongly in military service, and 'brought enormous energy to his job'.⁸²

After the war Dyett became the part-time secretary of the Victorian Trotting and Racing Association, a position he held for thirty years. The Association was largely controlled by the 'entrepreneur'⁸³ John Wren who, it has been speculated, chose Dyett as a 'respectable front man'.⁸⁴

Like Blackburn, Dyett had a genuine and deep-seated interest in and compassion for returned soldiers. As Blackburn allowed his home to become a shelter for returned servicemen down on their luck, Dyett bought a number of homes in Melbourne which he let to returned soldiers at low rent.⁸⁵ Dyett also had the personality to engage successfully in the quiet diplomacy he preferred: described by friends as efficient and tactful with a

⁸² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 8, 394.

⁸³ *ibid.*, v. 12, 580.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, v. 8, 394.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

magnetic personality and ascendant in debate, he combined these qualities with a strength which allowed the man told after Gallipoli that he would never walk again to later list walking as one of his recreations. He died in 1964.⁸⁶

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Dyett encountered sporadic but persistent opposition from state branches, particularly South Australia and Western Australia, which believed that the presidency would best be served by high-ranking, well-known and well-respected senior AIF officers. In 1920 the South Australian RSL, still very unhappy with the new president despite Blackburn's conciliatory words, wanted Sir John Monash to stand for president.⁸⁷ Monash refused on the grounds that it was 'essential' for the president's prestige that he be elected unanimously or unopposed. He argued that a contested election 'with the possible result of rejection' would be a 'totally undeserved humiliation'. As the South Australian RSL could not guarantee an uncontested election, Monash refused nomination.⁸⁸ The South

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ State Council minutes, 7 February 1920, 51.

⁸⁸ Monash to SA RSL sec Fearby, 12 April 1920, NLA MS6609/1/169a; *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 May 1920, 5-6.

Australian RSL was not impressed. *Diggers' Gazette* said:

It is highly improbable that he will ever be asked to stand again.⁸⁹ The unfortunate part about the whole business is that it is probably not a mere isolated incident, but is typical of the man, arises out of a deficit in his character, a calculating, unemotional consideration for material interests, that prevented him from being popular in the A.I.F., despite his great ability, and that will probably prevent him being popular in the civil life of Australia.⁹⁰

The outcome of that election was that no one stood against Dyett.⁹¹ Similar events occurred in 1923, 1928 and 1929, with various state branches (led by South Australia and Western Australia) approaching Monash but with Dyett - sometimes after a change of mind - deciding to re-nominate.⁹² In 1929, after Monash's refusal to stand in a contested election, Brigadier Charles Rosenthal stood against Dyett but was defeated 'on a show of hands'.⁹³

⁸⁹ It was wrong.

⁹⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 May 1920, 6.

⁹¹ Congress, 28 April 1920, 40, NLA MS6609/3.

⁹² Kristianson, 36, 58; *Mercury* (Hobart), 13 November 1923.

⁹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 1929.

Dyett faced another challenge from a high-ranking officer in 1930, South Australian president W.F.J. McCann, who had commanded the 10th Battalion from January 1919 until its disbandment in March 1919. Although Dyett had originally announced that he would not contest this election, he changed his mind, provoking furore among the branches which opposed him, particularly Western Australia.⁹⁴ McCann was supported by South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia, and one Tasmanian delegate who voted for him against that branch's instructions.⁹⁵ Dyett was re-elected by his own vote and the casting vote of the federal secretary, thus overcoming the voting of two-thirds of the league membership which voted against him.⁹⁶

Dyett was involved in another controversial election in 1932. At annual congress in Melbourne, he was re-elected seven votes to six against Brigadier-General C.H. Brand, who had been nominated by the South Australian and West Australian branches. Victoria also voted for 'Digger' Brand⁹⁷, who had been a popular general

⁹⁴ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 58-59.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁶ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 8, 394.

⁹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1932.

during the war and was at the time quartermaster general in the Australian Military Forces.⁹⁸ Dyett defeated Brand because, as president, he had both a deliberative and casting vote. After his re-election, a motion was put to congress to amend the constitution to provide for elections by secret ballot, with only branch delegates to have the right to elective votes, and the returning officer to have a casting vote.⁹⁹ A Victorian delegate, W.L. Allnut, said:

The Federal president could now cast two votes for himself. He had the same voting strength as each State, which was absurd and wrong. A president could continue to elect himself for years.¹⁰⁰

Although West Australian, South Australian and Victorian delegates supported the motion, it was lost seven to six, with Dyett presumably again using both his deliberative and his casting vote.¹⁰¹ Dyett was elected unopposed in 1933.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 7, 391.

⁹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1932.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 1933.

There was clearly a desire among some in the RSL to replace Captain Dyett with someone of more formidable rank, preferably a general. The League as a whole certainly saw advantage in associating itself with 'Great Leaders'. 1928 annual congress resolved that 'believing that a more active participation by Sir Harry Chauvel and Sir John Monash in League matters would be of immeasurable advantage, an invitation be extended by this Congress to our Great Leaders to confer with the Federal Executive with a view of [sic] obtaining the immense benefit of their incomparable ability'.¹⁰³ But Dyett's victories do not mean that the RSL wanted consciously to disavow leadership by senior officers and become instead an organisation of ordinary soldiers or junior officers. To start with, the only mention of rank in the debate surrounding Dyett's election in 1919 is descriptive ('Captain Dyett'). If the election was seen by some as an attempt to replace a Lieutenant Colonel with a Captain, rather than someone associated with the Nationalist Party with someone who was not,

¹⁰³ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 26. Later minutes do not record whether the invitation was extended or any reply by Chauvel or Monash.

it was not a point of view any delegates expressed.

Dyett also faced challenges from contenders of lesser rank. In 1921 Victorian RSL president H.J. Martin challenged Dyett for the RSL leadership. Hugh James Martin was born in Britain and emigrated to Australia 'as a boy'.¹⁰⁴ He trained to be a printer, and sometime around 1905 became the Victorian representative of the Modern Printing Company. He enlisted in the AIF in 1915 and served with the 37th Battalion, where he was promoted sergeant. After being wounded at Messines he was invalided to Australia, where he 'gave his services' to the Lady Stanley Red Cross Appeal which reportedly raised £300,000. After the war Martin resumed his job with the Modern Printing Company, and was also an amateur musician and vice-chairman of the Commercial Travellers' Association Choral Party. A Melbourne *Punch* article commented on his personality in 1920:

Serious in expression, his nature is kindly and patient. He is not the type of man one would expect to find on a political platform soaring into

¹⁰⁴ Melbourne *Punch*, 15 July 1920.

flights of rhetoric or trouncing an opponent.¹⁰⁵

Martin was Victorian RSL president in 1920 and 1921, and listed among his chief concerns education for soldiers.¹⁰⁶ The *Punch* comment that 'although he doesn't say so Mr Martin could have attained to the rank of officer while serving with the A.I.F.' suggests that a Victorian RSL president who had never been a commissioned officer was cause for discussion if not controversy.¹⁰⁷

Martin's bid against Dyett in 1921 had little chance of success. South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia nominated Dyett, Victoria alone nominated Martin.¹⁰⁸ Unsurprisingly, it was not a closely-run race, with Dyett defeating Martin eight votes to two.¹⁰⁹ Dyett similarly trounced a different Victorian candidate - another sergeant - in 1928, although the RSL presidency was to become that candidate's prize over twenty years later. George William Holland was born in 1897, and enlisted as private in the 7th Battalion in August 1914. After service in Egypt and Gallipoli, where

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Argus*, 3 August 1921.

¹⁰⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 August 1921, 33.

he was wounded at Lone Pine, Holland was promoted corporal in February 1916 and sergeant in July. He was wounded again at Pozières that month. In September 1917 he took part in an action in Belgium for which he was subsequently awarded a Military Medal.¹¹⁰

Holland was acting Victorian RSL president in 1929¹¹¹ and president between 1929 and 1951. He rose to national prominence after the second world war for his staunch anti-communism. When in 1948 a New South Wales court ruled that the New South Wales RSL branch's expulsion of communist members was illegal, Holland said that the Victorian branch would continue to expel communists.¹¹² That year he also argued that unions were deliberately 'trying to keep ex-servicemen out of certain industries' to extend labour shortages and consequent high wages.¹¹³ In 1946 he said that women should surrender to

¹¹⁰ ADB notes.

¹¹¹ It is unknown when Holland was repatriated to Australia. AWM 133, 'Nominal roll of AIF who left Australia for service abroad 1914-1918 war', lists only one George Holland as sergeant in the 7th Battalion, and he is listed as returning to Australia in September 1915. Nothing too can be found about Holland's career between his return to Australia and his contesting the federal presidency in 1928.

¹¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1948, in ADB Notes.

¹¹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 June 1948, *ibid.*

men the jobs they had obtained during the war¹¹⁴, and in 1951 argued in favour of West German immigration to Australia¹¹⁵, perhaps because he believed West Germans would counter the growth of communism in Australia. In 1950, a year after he had encountered concerted opposition within the Victorian RSL for holding the presidency for so long¹¹⁶, he replaced Eric Millhouse as federal RSL president, a position he held until 1960.¹¹⁷

Holland's challenge to Dyett in 1928 resulted in his defeat eleven votes to two. After this defeat and his election to the Victorian RSL presidency the following year, Holland continued to be one of Dyett's strongest critics. But although Holland did not officially 'bury the hatchet' with Dyett until 1938, in fact the Victorian branch's hostility to Dyett waned after 1931.¹¹⁸

After a turbulent period as RSL president during the 1920s and early 1930s, why did Dyett face less opposition during the 1930s? Kristianson has argued that early opposition to Dyett was based on objections

¹¹⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 14 January 1946, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Argus, 2 August 1951, *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Sun, 28 July 1949, *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 241. Holland held the federal and Victorian presidencies simultaneously for a short time.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 60.

to his tactics, while the relative stability which followed the crises of the Depression resulted from his increasing willingness to sanction other pressure group methods, growing branch participation at the federal level, the gradual falling off of opposition, and a changing emphasis in League concerns.¹¹⁹ Kristianson does not see Dyett's unpopularity as related to his rank, except to note that towards the end of the 1920s Western Australian RSL president H.B. Collett called for 'renewed vigour, fresh inspiration, and higher leadership'¹²⁰, nor does he interpret Dyett's initial election or his long presidency as a decision by the RSL to be an organisation of ordinary soldiers, not high-ranking officers.

What of Dyett's denominational and professional associations? Although RSL members would certainly have been aware that Dyett was a Catholic and, at the time of his election in 1919, part-time secretary to the Victorian Trotting and Racing Association (and therefore an associate of John Wren)¹²¹, this is not mentioned in the verbatim debates of that election nor appears to have figured

¹¹⁹ See particularly *ibid.*, 26, 47-48 and 67-69.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 58.

¹²¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 8, 394.

in any subsequent election. Nor was Dyett's anti-conscription stand an issue at the 1919 election, although it may well have been had the election been held one year earlier.

It is paradoxical that a president so unpopular during the 1920s and early 1930s could also have been so successful. As we have seen, there were many reasons for this. But in 1919 there was a clear and single reason for Dyett's victory over Bolton: a majority of state branches wanted the RSL headed by someone with less direct association with 'partisan politics'. At the June federal executive meeting, all representatives seemed to agree that Bolton's manifesto had been too extreme, and that some sort of retraction by the federal executive was necessary. When congress met a month later, it became clear that some delegates thought that Bolton's indiscretion typified the dangers of having a politician as national president, while others, possibly because they thought that some RSL association with conservative politics was desirable, believed that Bolton's continuing presidency was not incompatible with preserving RSL unity. After a drawn-out struggle, the former could claim victory. It had not been possible for Bolton's opponents

to ban party politicians from RSL executive positions, but they had been able to dump Bolton. The RSL never again had such a direct association with conservative politics. It is significant too that Blackburn, who had bitterly opposed Dyett's election, felt committed enough to the idea of 'no-politics' to avoid associating his state branch with Hughes during the war gratuity fracas, even though Hughes led the party to which Blackburn owed political allegiance. The irony is that Dyett did use politics during negotiations over the war gratuity, by directly and privately negotiating with Hughes and by playing off the Nationalist Party against the Labor Party. In fact, this established the pattern of RSL political intervention in the ensuing decade. Most of the RSL's difficulties were not over ideology or 'high' politics, but over hip-pocket issues, where its ends could best be achieved by recourse to such 'playing off'.

But the federal action in moving away from the Nationalist party did allow the RSL practical scope to negotiate with all political parties, and imbued it with a credibility essential to ensure the organisation's survival in the 1920s. This was only possible because after the war ended

the Nationalist Party no longer had a monopoly on 'Imperial loyalty' and 'nationalism'. The 'no politics' faction within the RSL realised that if the organisation continued to equate 'nationalism' or 'loyalty' solely with the Nationalist Party, it stood to lose members and to deter potential members who might consider themselves loyal to both Australia and the Empire but whose sympathies or allegiances lay with the labour movement. This reflected a significant change of direction in Australian society. With the coming of peace and the return of Australian soldiers, middle ground, 'grey' areas and acknowledged political complexities once again became possible. It was now possible to be a returned soldier, a unionist, an Australian patriot and an Imperial loyalist all at the same time. Serle is right to observe that the change from 'radical' to 'conservative' nationalism was a broadening process.¹²² While the RSL continued with its 'conservative' tendency of seeing Bolshevism underlying all 'Left' disturbances, its character as an ex-service organisation forced it to recognise, where many other

¹²² Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', 150.

conservatives could not, the reality of this broadened peacetime nationalism. In this respect, the RSL aided in translating the changes wrought by war into peace.

Chapter 5

Defence and immigration

The RSL was formed when Australia was at war, and its membership came from those who had seen active service. Not surprisingly, the RSL felt that it had special interests and special rights in defence matters. After 1918, many of its members continued their association with the army by participating in postwar militia forces, and important aspects of the RSL's lobbying at this time concerned improving service conditions and seeing to Australia's defence needs. Recognising that Australia was a Pacific nation which relied on Britain for its defence, the RSL embraced and perpetuated the Imperial tie both for practical and emotional reasons. This did not constitute a return to the thinking of 1914. The RSL combined Imperial loyalty with a questioning of the wisdom of Britain's foreign policy, and realised that Australia might have to fight a war alone in the Pacific. The RSL advocated increased defence spending at a time when both conservative and Labor opinion, for different reasons, favoured spending cuts. In the immediate postwar years, the RSL supported various

world peace movements, although its approval of the League of Nations was tempered by the belief that the blood price paid during the war was too high for Australia to risk being unprepared for future war.

The RSL was also concerned about immigration, which it believed was profoundly important in ensuring Australia's defence preparedness. To defend Australia, it argued, Australia had to have a larger population, and not made up of any kind of immigrant. For the RSL, as for most Australians, the principle of White Australia was inviolable. The RSL could see no inconsistency in clamouring for population for Australia's defence needs while upholding an immigration policy which threatened to wreck an alliance between Britain and Japan which some believed underpinned Australian security.

At the same time, the RSL could also be inconsistent even about British immigration. It usually welcomed British migrants because Australia needed population to defend itself and because they were a bulwark against Asian immigration, but it shunned them when they threatened the economic position of Australian returned soldiers. When defence considerations came to outweigh economic considerations, as in the latter half of the

1920s, the RSL still refused to contemplate any immigration other than from the British Isles, although clearly this source could not hope to supply the numbers necessary to defend the continent. The RSL's inability to resolve inconsistencies in its attitude towards immigration narrowed its defence policy options, leaving it little choice but to advocate increased defence spending as the sole practical response to growing concerns about Australian security.

While Australia was at war, much of the RSL's defence lobbying centred on conscription, but it was also concerned about soldiers' service and discharge conditions. For example, at a January 1916 meeting of the South Australian Returned Soldiers' Association, Corporal Coffin complained that returned men required fresh attestation papers and regimental numbers when re-entering camp, and the association resolved 'to write to the Military Authorities and secure a ruling about it'.¹ This kind of concern and representation continued after the war. The RSL was particularly incensed at 'eligibles' in the postwar militia forces. In 1919 national congress protested against 'the

¹ General Meeting, 19 January 1916, RSA Minute Book, 10.

alarming number of eligible men who did not offer their services with the A.I.F., and who hold commissions in the militia'.² This reflected the RSL's belief that returned soldiers were not receiving adequate reward for their war service in the postwar defence force, and that non-veterans were being favoured. 'Owing to the Act of Parliament which restricts all permanent appointments to the Defence Department to cadets from the Duntroon Military College', a delegate told the 1919 congress, 'a number of officers, some holding the high rank of lieutenant-colonel, who desire to follow the military profession, have been informed that to do so they must revert back to the rank of N.C.O.'.³ In fact, the whole question of the value of war service in relation to postwar life, whether in the defence force or civilian occupations, was a vexed one for veterans. Brigadier H.G. Bennett returned to Australia in 1919 and was 'offered his old job at the old terms, a fair offer by his employer's standards, but one which by his own set an impossibly low value on his war service'.⁴ McCann rose from private to battalion commander, was decorated DSO and MC

² *Register*, 23 July 1919.

³ *ibid.*, 17 July 1919.

⁴ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 271.

and bar, but listed 'clerk' as his occupation when marrying in 1921.⁵ When Butler enlisted in the AIF in 1916 he was manager of the stock department of the South Australian Farmers' Co-operative Union. Three years' later, having led the 43rd Battalion throughout 1917 and earning a DSO, he 'returned to the Farmers' Union and to his chagrin was made auctioneer, his old job having gone to another'.⁶ Such things could only contribute to the returned soldier's sense of difference and his belief that society placed little value on war service.

Campaigning about service conditions formed one strand of the RSL's interest in defence. Another was concern for the future defence of Australia. Even before the Armistice, the RSL's preoccupation with the needs of war did not prevent it from considering the military implications of the postwar world. It believed that its role in ensuring Australia's defence would be as important as the AIF's wartime contribution. This view preceded the September 1916 federation of state returned soldier associations. An early *R.S.A. Magazine* editorial predicted that 'the R.S.A.

⁵ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 10, 217.

⁶ *ibid.*, v. 7, 504.

generally will be a benefit to the Nation because we shall never allow ourselves to be bullied into a sense of false security in the future, the same as we were before the present war'.⁷

The RSL was greatly concerned with Australia's place in the Pacific and its ability to defend itself. It realised that any consideration of Australia's role and capabilities could not exclude Britain, and it sought therefore to confirm the emotional and practical validity of the Imperial tie. This tie represented an important emotional continuity with the prewar era, and had been a fundamental reason for Australia's participation in the war. It was unthinkable to the RSL that it would question the basis of that tie, for to do so was to question the premises on which thousands of Australians had died. In July 1919 the RSL cabled George V that congress 'trusts that His Majesty will realise that the services of Australian Sailors and Soldiers are still at the disposal of the Empire and should the occasion again arise for a stand to be made for the liberty of the smaller and weaker nation [sic], the survivors of the A.I.F. in

⁷ *R.S.A. Magazine*, April 1916, 5.

the recent Great War may be relied upon as confidently today as in 1914'.⁸

The RSL also saw the war as confirming British Empire unity. 'The war has united Australia more than ever to the Mother Country', said *Diggers' Gazette* in January 1920, 'and made patent to the world that the British Empire is to be regarded as one great people with one great destiny'.⁹ Some members even returned to the prewar ideal of Imperial Federation, a theme sounded periodically in *Diggers' Gazette*. An April 1920 article argued that:

Such a Federation would take from us no powers which we at present possess, but would give us some which we do not now possess. The powers which an Imperial Parliament would naturally take over are those now exercised by the House of Commons over foreign affairs, colonial affairs and defence, and inter-Imperial communications. That is to say we should have a direct voice, where now we have none, in deciding the policy that shall cause or prevent future wars. As regards defence, of course each unit could control its own army and navy in time of peace, as Australia does now ...

⁸ Congress, 17 July 1919, 5, Central Council Minutes.

⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 January 1920, 7.

handing it over to the Imperial authority in time of war.¹⁰

The RSL was shocked when the 1921 Australian Labor Party Conference resolved that 'we, as members of the Australian Labor Party, pledge ourselves, individually and collectively, to refuse to participate in any war outside the Commonwealth of Australia'.¹¹ *Diggers' Gazette* sneered:

And yet some people wonder why more Diggers don't join the ALP. The *Diggers' Gazette* is not indulging in party politics when it says that to this particular resolution the Returned Soldiers' League is utterly opposed. As the President of the League (Mr Dyett) stated at the World's Conference of Ex-Servicemen, if the Mother Country calls again 'Australia will be there', whether the next war is in Australia or anywhere else.¹²

In fact, Britain soon did come close to calling. In 1922 Lloyd George invited the 'co-operation' of Dominion prime ministers in despatching 'military reinforcements' to support British intervention in the dispute

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 1 April 1920, 4.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 21 April 1921. 7.

¹² *ibid.*, 7.

between Greece and Turkey.¹³ The British request for help was worded in strongly emotional terms with direct appeal to returned soldiers, referring to the 'twenty thousand British and Anzac graves' that might 'fall into the ruthless hands of the Kemalists'. The cablegram, while issued by Lloyd George, was drafted by Churchill.¹⁴ When he heard the news, RSL acting federal president Ernest Turnbull immediately cabled state branches that 'in view of the present grave Eastern crisis involving world's peace, have assured Government and people of unswerving fidelity of League, and will support action as will preserve safety and integrity of Empire; invite your endorsements; reply immediately'.¹⁵ The endorsements were not long in coming. 'Any crisis affecting the stability and integrity of the Empire', replied South Australian president C.P. Butler, 'will be met by the same practical spirit of loyalty as

¹³ David Walder, *The Chanak Affair*, London, 1969, 214-215, cited in Paul R. Bartrop, ' "Mismanaged, Inflexible and Irresponsible": British Foreign Policy and the Chanak Crisis, September 1922', unpublished paper presented to the Australasian Modern British Historians Association Conference, University of Queensland, July 1989, 6.

¹⁴ P.M. Sales, 'W.M. Hughes and the Chanak Crisis of 1922', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, xvii:3 (December 1971), 393-4.

¹⁵ *Digger*, 7 October 1922, 44.

characterised the men of the A.I.F. from this State during the Great War'.¹⁶ Expressions of support from the various branches were reportedly accompanied by 'multitudes of offers ... from those who were willing to serve the Empire again'.¹⁷ Sir Harry Chauvel later told the South Australian branch that when the 'home Government' asked for solidarity, the Defence Department was 'besieged with offers of service, and telegrams offering assistance received from the RSL was, in his opinion, a most important factor that established the strength and solidarity of Australia'.¹⁸

It seemed a return to 1914. Was it? The Opposition argued that a referendum would be necessary before forces could be committed¹⁹, and Hughes, while publicly announcing support²⁰, was 'furious' that the Australian government had learned of its 'intended military involvement ... through local newspapers' before it received the official request.²¹ Elements within the RSL were unhappy too. Side by side with published

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Digger*, 22 December 1922, 36.

¹⁹ T.B. Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, Canberra, 1978, 77.

²⁰ Sales, 'W.M. Hughes and the Chanak Crisis of 1922', 395.

²¹ Bartrop, '"Mismanaged, Inflexible and Irresponsible"...', 6.

accounts of the alleged 'multitudes of offers', *Digger* found room for an article which questioned the wisdom of Lloyd George's foreign policy and which concluded ambivalently that 'when a ship is in peril it is not an appropriate time to quarrel with the captain'.²² Indeed, it was obvious that Australia did not want to play cabin-boy to Lloyd George's captain. A Queensland delegate typified the RSL's attitude when, at the 1921 national congress, he commented that 'the general view was that in any future war in which the Empire was concerned Australia should enter that war as a separate entity and that she should be more an ally than a subordinate portion of the British forces'.²³

The RSL's concerns went further. It questioned Britain's capacity to defend Australia. Sentiment and tradition notwithstanding, the RSL recognised the realities of the postwar world and Australia's position in it as a Pacific nation. In December 1919 *Diggers' Gazette* reprinted a *Sydney Morning Herald* article which commented on Lord Jellicoe's naval

²² *Digger*, 7 October 1922, 3.

²³ *Daily Mail*, 5 August 1921.

recommendations for the Pacific²⁴ and reflected concerns shared by the RSL:

We believe that we shall never meet either the United States or Japan in combat, but even so we cannot take risks, we cannot relax our defence. Three of the Great Powers of the world today have either all their interests or very large interests centred in the Pacific. Two of these nations, the United States and Japan, have resources immensely strengthened by the war. The British Empire has come out of the war victorious, but with a crushing load of debt.²⁵

While urging greater unity with and loyalty to the Empire, the RSL admitted that Australia might have to stand alone in a war in the Pacific, and frequently warned against what it called 'Imperial complacency'. In February 1920 *Diggers' Gazette*, putting the RSL's view, cautioned:

We are, to all intents, an independent nation, and it is up to us to defend ourselves as such. We were lucky during the last war in having the two most powerful nations

²⁴ Jellicoe had advised that an enormous Pacific fleet would be necessary for complete security. See Heather Radi, '1920-29', 363, in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1984.

²⁵ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 December 1919, 47.

in the Pacific on our side. But what would have happened if one of them had been an enemy? Great Britain, no matter how much she may have desired to do so, could have afforded us practically no protection, and who knows what may happen in the future? It is very evident that we must be prepared to defend ourselves, and if we are going in for Defence, for the sake of Australia let us do it properly.²⁶

The RSL's growing belief that Australia should take its own steps towards a 'proper' defence put it at odds with the policy of the Australian government. This was most obvious in its attitude towards the outcome of the 1921-22 Washington Conference for the Limitation of Naval Armament. Before the Washington Conference, Australia had found it increasingly 'unacceptable', for reasons of domestic economy, to maintain the level of its existing naval forces, and even if it had, its defence power compared to Japan's was 'insignificant'.²⁷ Under the terms of the Washington Treaty, the Australian government felt that both its economic and security problems were solved. To save money, Australia suspended all warship building and

²⁶ *ibid.*, 1 February 1920, 15.

²⁷ Radi, '1920-29', 363.

naval base construction, reduced fleet personnel from 4843 in 1921 to 3500 in 1923, and reduced the number of ships in commission from twenty five to thirteen.²⁸ For security, Australia looked to Japan's acceptance 'of the principle that the British Empire and the United States were "two ocean" powers and thereby entitled to commensurately larger navies'.²⁹ Both government and conservative press were well pleased. 'Because we stood by the Empire', said the *Melbourne Argus*, 'there has come to us from the Washington Conference peace and security, saving us millions of money and enabling us to concentrate on economic affairs'.³⁰ After the Washington Conference, Heather Radi has noted, Australians presumed that 'security was not a pressing problem'.³¹

The RSL was not so sanguine. It looked on aghast as naval reductions came into effect, including, on 12 April 1924, the sinking of H.M.A.S. *Australia*. 'We have no hesitation in stating', a *Digger* editorial

²⁸ *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (hereafter *Commonwealth Year Book*), Melbourne, n. 17, 1924, 592.

²⁹ Radi, '1920-29', 365.

³⁰ *Argus*, 20 February 1922, cited in J.C. Vinson, 'The Problem of Australian Representation at the Washington Conference for the Limitation of Naval Armament', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, iv:2 (November 1958), 156.

³¹ Radi, '1920-29', 366.

lamented in February 1924, 'that in comparison with the treatment accorded to other nations - far less vulnerable to naval attack than the immense area of our own unprotected shores - that Australia was very badly let down at the Washington Conference'.³² Later that year an article deplored the 'state of insecurity against attack in which Australia pursues a deliberate path', and wondered why, given that ex-AIF men were the best material for the defence of Australia, 'no really comprehensive effort has been made or no effective appeal advanced to attract surviving members of the AIF into a defence organisation as a bulwark against any possible foe'.³³ Although it took some comfort in the 1923 Imperial Conference's decision to construct a Naval Base at Singapore as the cornerstone of imperial Pacific strategy, such comfort was short-lived when construction stopped in 1924 and proceeded only intermittently for the rest of the decade.³⁴

Although undoubtedly many Australians feared that war would come again and that

³² *Digger*, 22 February 1924, 3.

³³ *ibid.*, 25 April 1924, 3.

³⁴ Radi, '1920-29', 365. For RSL comments on the Singapore Naval Base, see, for example, *Digger*, 11 January 1924, 39.

Australia might be unprepared, the RSL's concern was of a particular kind, the kind unique to those who had seen war first-hand. The RSL accepted that the war had been a just war fought to protect the rights of weaker nations against stronger. For RSL members, upholding this principle had involved personal sacrifice far beyond that of civilians. The RSL looked to a peaceful postwar world because that was what its members and their dead comrades had fought for, and when it realised that the war had not brought lasting peace, it felt that circumstances had betrayed those who had died for such a peace. In 1922 *Digger* lamented that peace seemed far away, and referred to the dead of the last war whose voices cried out for the lasting peace for which they believed they had fought and died.³⁵ But the AIF had also fought for the defence of Australia as an integral part of the British Empire. The RSL believed that the greater betrayal would be to allow Australia to remain unprepared for any future war, for Australia's defeat would negate the suffering and sacrifice of soldiers between 1914 and 1918. The drift of the world towards another war was something about which the RSL could

³⁵ *Digger*, 7 October 1922, 3.

do nothing, but Australian defence preparedness was. 'Men must ever be prepared to fight in a just cause rather than fall dishonoured and defeated through inaction', said *Digger* in 1922.³⁶ The RSL's fear of a betrayal of this kind steered it towards a fundamentally conservative view of human nature which held that war was an inevitable part of life, for at least such a belief mitigated against complacency and unpreparedness. 'As long as human nature remains as it is today there will always be war', *Diggers' Gazette* said as early as February 1920, 'and it therefore behoves us, as citizens of this most glorious land, to do something tangible in the way of defending it from others who may covet it'.³⁷

This underlying conservatism was present in the RSL's attitude towards the League of Nations. In the years immediately following the war, the RSL had coupled talk of avoiding war with serious and partly successful attempts at cooperating with various 'world peace' movements.³⁸ In April 1920 *Diggers' Gazette* argued:

³⁶ *ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 February 1920, 17.

³⁸ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

That nations should settle their disputes by negotiation, arbitration, legal process, or by whatever you like to call it, instead of by war, is so obvious that nobody would dispute it save those cranky militarists who hold that war is a blessing in itself, that it prevents us from becoming 'soft' and improves the race. Every sane person knows that it has the very opposite effect, that it is a curse from start to finish.³⁹

In May 1923 the South Australian RSL and the state League of Nations Union met, 'an occasion', trumpeted *Digger*, 'when, we believe, for the first time in Australian history, an official organisation of returned soldiers and sailors have [sic] joined hands with a pacifist association in united advocacy that reason and justice should be substituted for the arbitrament of war'.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 April 1920, 4. Stephen R. Ward, citing moves by Henri Barbusse and the former Allies to form international organisations to improve international relations and bring about peace, has noted that 'this type of progressive desire on the part of ex-servicemen was indeed typical up to the outbreak of the Second World War'. He continues: 'It belies, in part, the belief that veterans must always be classed as conservative and reactionary ... Above all, they believed that their generation deserved an opportunity to lead the country'. (Ward, *The War Generation*, 8.)

⁴⁰ *Digger*, 11 May 1923, 4. It also complained that this 'magnificent' meeting had received

Yet the RSL had always been ambivalent towards the League of Nations and the League of Nations Union. In October 1920 *Diggers' Gazette* reported that the question of the League of Nations had been discussed at a recent state council meeting, where it had been suggested that the federal executive contact soldiers' organisations in the former Allied countries to determine their attitudes toward the organisation. *Diggers' Gazette* noted that 'this recommendation had too large a scope to suit several Councillors, but it was eventually recommended that the Federal Council be asked to enquire into the attitude of all branches of the Association towards the League'. Overall, the consensus among state councillors seemed to be that Australia should fulfil its commitment to the League of Nations but build its defence and population also.⁴¹ *Returned Soldier* commented:

The Great War has left us with international responsibilities, with a commitment to serve in the League of Nations, with a very real share in the Empire co-partnership, and our own especial obligations to prepare for defence as an isolated and

meagre press coverage, an indication perhaps that the RSL was either ahead or behind its time.

⁴¹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 October 1920, 43.

coveted part of the Empire. With the best intentions to live at peace with the world, Australians create for themselves a fools' paradise if they behaved [sic] as if there were no ... need for them to have a defence policy.⁴²

This ambivalence became more pronounced about the time that Australia was beginning to fulfil its obligations under the terms of the Washington Treaty. At the same time as *Digger* was embracing the idea of a meeting between the RSL and the 'pacifist' League of Nations Union⁴³, some members were using 'pacifist' pejoratively and making it clear that their continued support for the Union depended upon its demonstrating that it was not pacifist. In August 1923 several South Australian RSL figures publicly accused the League of Nations Union of assisting to organise a meeting of the 'No More War Movement'⁴⁴, precipitating a controversy which revealed both a division between RSL 'hawks' and 'doves' and the tenuousness of the RSL's support for the League of Nations. Shortly after the initial outburst, several state board delegates expressed regret at the

⁴² *Returned Soldier*, 17 September 1920, 4.

⁴³ *Digger*, 11 May 1923, 4.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 10 August 1923, 45.

remarks and the wide publicity they had received. Mr Vaughan of the League of Nations Union was present and explained that, although the Union had had nothing to do with the gathering, confusion had arisen because both the convener and the chairman of the meeting had been Union committee members⁴⁵, a revelation which must have done little to mollify those who had raised the original charge.

At the September 1923 sub-branch conference, delegate Bulbeck, in moving that the RSL publicly record its support for the Union, assured members that pacifists 'did not entirely constitute the [Union's] Committee'. For good measure, he added that the committee actually included a number of returned soldiers.⁴⁶ The Union 'did not stand for peace at any price', stated another delegate.⁴⁷ In reply, C.P. Butler, a future president of the state branch and a noted 'hawk', voiced the concerns of an increasingly powerful faction within the RSL which believed that peace and defence matters were far too important to be entrusted to civilians, amateurs and idealists. He explicitly associated members of peace

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 28 September 1923, 38.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 38.

organisations with that most despised individual, the 'shirker', thus transposing in one step the debates of the war into peacetime and implying that the underlying issue was not defence but loyalty. Butler 'explained in [sic] length that he was heartily in accord with the objects of the League of Nations [Union], but he wanted to see returned soldiers in Executive positions and not men who, although able to have gone to the war, did not do so'.⁴⁸ 'The pacifist element', he said, 'should be kept out of a body advocating such a world-wide policy as that put forward by the League of Nations'.⁴⁹ The meeting resolved that 'in view of the present world unrest this State Sub-Branch Conference commend the aims and objects of the League of Nations' Union to all members of the R.S.S.I.L. in this State, it being understood that we pledge ourselves to safeguard national defence while we deplore all wars of aggression'.⁵⁰ In this, it affirmed the lead given two years earlier by federal president Gilbert Dyett who, at the Empire Congress of Ex-Servicemen in South Africa, had seconded a successful motion stating that

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 38.

... until the League of Nations proves to be a practical organisation for the maintenance of peace, it is essential that the defence of the Empire be maintained in such a way as to guarantee the integrities of the territories against any probable enemies. The conference views with deep concern the fact that the lessons in regard to provision for war, which were brought home in 1914 and the succeeding years at an incalculable cost in life and sacrifice, are being lost sight of.⁵¹

RSL support for peace movements did not evaporate during the 1920s. A delegate at 1924 congress, referring to the catchcry that the first world war had been 'a war to end war and Militarism', moved successfully that 'as little has so far been done towards the fulfilment of pre-enlistment promises given by leaders of Allied Nations during the Great War ... Congress trusts that the League of Nations will in future evolve as to fulfil such promises'.⁵² 1925 congress also dealt with matters relating to peace, and resolved that 'this Congress expresses its deep satisfaction at the signing of the Locarno Pact, and earnestly trusts that it will prove

⁵¹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 March 1921, 23.

⁵² Congress, 11 November 1924, 10, Central Council Minutes.

the powerful instrument it is designed to be in securing a lasting peace among the nations of the world, and in fostering their progress and prosperity'.⁵³ But a different call was that made at congress in 1928, where South Australian delegates moved successfully that 'Congress is of the opinion that Australia should have an adequate Defence Force and strongly urge the Commonwealth Government to provide sufficient on the estimates for this purpose'.⁵⁴

The RSL judged immigration to be at least as important to Australia and its security as armaments, an attitude it shared with Hughes and many others.⁵⁵ In September 1920 *Returned Soldier* echoed the RSL view when it complained that, although Hughes had referred to immigration 'as a part of the measures for defence', 'so far, excepting for much talk in Federal and State circles, there has been little proof of appreciation among politicians of the relative importance of expenditure upon people and upon battleships'.⁵⁶

⁵³ *ibid.*, 3 December 1925, 17. For Australia's role - or lack of one - in the negotiation of this pact, see Millar, *Australia in Peace and War*, 124.

⁵⁴ Congress, 28 November 1928, NLA MS6609/3.

⁵⁵ Radi, '1920-29', 362.

⁵⁶ *Returned Soldier*, 17 September 1920, 4-5.

The RSL's first calls for a resumption of immigration after the war favoured British ex-servicemen. In December 1919 South Australian state secretary A.R.G. Fearby wrote that 'ex-Imperial soldiers in large numbers will ... look to Australia as their future home', and asserted that 'in spite of our little parochialists we want this extra population and this particular type of immigrant'.⁵⁷ *Returned Soldier* agreed that extra population was wanted, although it thought that all British immigrants, not necessarily veterans, would do. 'Australia is the last of the continents where white settlement is feasible that is not effectively occupied', it argued in August 1920. 'We must build up our population from within the Empire', it continued, 'and the only reservoir of human material that can be drawn on is the British Isles'.⁵⁸

The RSL's attitude towards immigration was that of the government and the majority of the population - that the principle of a White Australia was inviolable. When Britain considered renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1921, *Returned Soldier* stated that 'Australia can permit no modification of

⁵⁷ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 December 1919, 13.

⁵⁸ *Returned Soldier*, 20 August 1920, 4.

the White Australia policy ... [and] any concession in the future terms of the Anglo-Japanese alliance inimical to the policies and the national aspirations of Australia and Canada is unthinkable'.⁵⁹

Delegates to 1921 congress waited anxiously for the outcome of the Imperial Conference, where 'it is not at all improbable that the Japanese will demand that at least a certain amount of immigration of Japanese into British Dominions be granted if the British Government wants to renew the [Anglo-Japanese] treaty'.⁶⁰ At the same time, a Queensland motion called for total prohibition of 'Asiatic' immigration, which it believed constituted 'a menace to the national purity of the Commonwealth'.⁶¹ Acknowledging that 'delegates will have to take a momentous step when the resolution is put that all Asiatics be excluded from Australia', *Diggers' Gazette* attempted to explain, somewhat lamely, that 'if Congress decides that the men of the Orient shall not mix with the men of the Southern Zone, it will not be because of failure to appreciate the Asiatics' national aspirations, but merely because East is East and West is West

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 10 September 1920, 4.

⁶⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 July 1921, 3.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 15.

and never the twain shall meet'.⁶² The Imperial Conference favoured renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance⁶³, as did Hughes, who saw it as a possible bulwark against Japan.⁶⁴ But the United States had other ideas and the alliance was not renewed.⁶⁵ With White Australia secure, and Australia relying for protection from Japan on British diplomacy at the forthcoming disarmament talks in Washington⁶⁶, national congress resolved to lobby the federal government to prohibit 'Asiatics from entering the Commonwealth under any conditions' on the grounds that they 'would soon constitute a menace to national purity'.⁶⁷

Once the spectre of a breach of White Australia through the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was laid to rest, the RSL began to see 'white and right' immigration as a threat to the economic position of returned soldiers rather than as a bastion against Asian immigration. In October 1921 *Diggers' Gazette* reaffirmed 'the unanimous opinion of diggers ... that Australia should be kept white' and 'as far as possible free from German taint as well'.

⁶² *ibid.*, 28.

⁶³ *Argus*, 4 July 1921.

⁶⁴ Radi, '1920-29', 364.

⁶⁵ Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-41*, Canberra, 1952, 13.

⁶⁶ Radi, '1920-29', 364.

⁶⁷ *Argus*, 5 August 1921.

But it admitted that 'on one matter alone, however, [there has] been a divergence of opinion among the diggers, and that is in respect to the wisdom of bringing in immigrants, no matter how desirable they may be, while the present unemployed problem is still on the State's hands'.⁶⁸ In February 1922 *Diggers' Gazette* asserted again that British immigrants were welcome before any others because their standard of living was similar to that of Australians, but it noted also that some returned soldiers wanted British immigration restricted 'until Australia's own returned soldiers have been absorbed in employment'.⁶⁹ A later article confirmed that the RSL supported the immigration of new settlers 'of British race' as long as 'it was consistent with the interests of returned members of the AIF in Australia'.⁷⁰

The RSL also assumed that the land would be the basis of population expansion 'and new settlers the key to greatness'⁷¹, but it feared that immigrants would settle in the cities rather than the country. *Diggers' Gazette* warned:

⁶⁸ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 October 1921, 13.

⁶⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, iv:2 (February 1922), 2.

⁷⁰ *Digger*, 21 August 1922, 2.

⁷¹ Radi, '1920-29', 362.

Whether or not the British Government's aim of sending out Imperial ex-servicemen at the present time is wise or not, little exception will be taken to the immigration into the State of boys who are to be trained in farm work. Of the ex-servicemen who would be coming out with the avowed intention of taking up land it would not be an exaggeration to say that a proportion would finally drift into the cities. That is where the harm would come in.⁷²

At the Great Conference of the British Empire Service Legion in London in September 1923, Gilbert Dyett told delegates that 'Australia was prepared to help the Britisher who would play the game but she was not willing to spend money on men who would go on land and then drift out into the big towns'.⁷³

RSL views on defence and immigration were outlined at congress in November 1924, when it adopted a 'national policy'. This policy, which later became part of the RSL's federal constitution, enshrined a commitment to 'the integrity of our Empire', 'White Australia', 'an adequate Defence Force', and 'a vigorous Immigration System with necessary safeguards to ensure suitable migrants being

⁷² *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 October 1921, 13.

⁷³ *Digger*, 28 September 1923, 5.

obtained'.⁷⁴ As well, congress passed five resolutions dealing specifically with defence, an indication of how important the RSL considered the matter. Four of these resolutions involved fundamental questions of defence policy. Congress advocated increased measures to ensure that Australia was protected against air attack, expressed concern at the inadequacy of measures taken by the Commonwealth government on training, tanks, munitions and modern equipment, called for Citizen Forces and Senior Cadet training to be placed 'on the same footing as in 1914', and urged the government to press Imperial authorities to establish the Singapore base. The fifth motion asked that the age limit of returned soldiers be extended to fifty years for appointment or enlistment in civil or military branches of the Defence Department.⁷⁵

The 1924 national policy signalled a change in the RSL's attitude towards immigration. It judged that the risks of a drift to towns and unemployment were

⁷⁴ Congress, 12 November 1924, 13, Central Council Minutes. Other elements of the policy were unification of railway gauges, nationalisation of main roads, 'systematic immigration of industries', reforestation, public health, and 'trade within our Empire'.

⁷⁵ Congress, 11 November 1924, 6-7, Central Council Minutes.

outweighed by the risk involved in defending a sparsely-populated continent, and it began to lobby again for British ex-service immigration.⁷⁶ 1925 congress resolved that each state RSL prepare literature on the benefits of joining the organisation for transmission to London 'for distribution through the respective Agents General to intending ex-Imperial Soldier Migrants to Australia', and to the West Australian branch so that representatives could meet migrant ships on arrival and solicit League membership.⁷⁷ Congress also recommended that RSL representatives approach the Overseas Settlement Committee in London to obtain 'a measure of financial assistance over and above the consideration granted by any Dominion Government to ex-Imperial Soldiers availing themselves of land settlement provisions operating within the several Dominions'.⁷⁸

The RSL wanted a 'vigorous Immigration System'⁷⁹ to guarantee Australia's security, but its definition of 'suitability' was narrow, for it believed that Australia's 'national integrity' would be undermined by

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 12 November 1924, 13.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 1 December 1925, 6.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 12 November 1924, 13.

undesirable immigration.⁸⁰ The most significant body of immigrants in the 1920s, after the United Kingdom, came from Italy, particularly after the United States imposed immigration restrictions in 1924.⁸¹ 'Southern Europeans' became the object of frequent RSL attacks, especially in South Australia. Towns such as Port Pirie and Port Augusta had relatively high 'non-British' immigrant populations, and their RSL sub-branches urged the state branch to lobby the federal government to reduce the number of immigrants from southern Europe. In February 1925 the Port Pirie sub-branch 'emphatically' protested against the 'unrestricted admission of immigrants from Mediterranean countries to Australia, it being against the best interests of Australians in general'.⁸² Port Augusta sub-branch tabled a motion at a December 1926 state council meeting that stated that

members of this Sub-Branch view with great alarm the influxion [sic] of

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia*, v. 4 (1901-1942), Melbourne, 1986, 207. The three largest groups of immigrants between 1921 and 1928 after 'Britishers' were Italians (32,025), Chinese (14,200), and 'North Americans' (that is, from the United States) (12,861). See *Commonwealth Year Book*, n. 19, 1926, 897-8, n. 22, 1929, 932-3.

⁸² *People*, 6 February 1925, 22.

foreigners to this country, and that preference is being given to them instead of to Britishers. We demand this position to be reversed, so as to be in keeping with the ideals of Australia, and the promises given her Sailors and Soldiers.⁸³

Port Augusta was raised again at the September 1927 sub-branch conference, where its delegate demanded that 'immigration should be firstly from the British Isles, and secondly from the Northern European races, from which sprung the original inhabitants of the British Isles'.⁸⁴ If southern European immigration were allowed to continue, argued a delegate, as 'bad a state as America' might be reached.⁸⁵

The state branch transmitted these resolutions willingly to national congresses. In November 1924 C.P. Butler moved successfully that 'in view of the very large number of undesirable alien immigrants who are arriving in Australia the Federal Government be asked to take such measures as will at least regulate this most serious

⁸³ State Council, 8 December 1926, 321-2, State Council Minutes.

⁸⁴ Minutes of the South Australian Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia Sub-Branch Conference, 27-28 September 1927, MLSA (hereafter 1927 Sub-Branch Conference), n.p.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, n.p.

position, a position that is, and will be, detrimental to the best interest of Australia'.⁸⁶ 1925 congress resolved that, 'having in view the gravity of the influx of Southern Europeans', the RSL ask the federal government to give 'serious consideration' to 'strictly enforcing' the dictation test and the financial requirements of immigrants, and to requiring that immigrants reside five years within the Commonwealth before they were granted citizenship. Another provision calling for the introduction of a quota system 'as is the practice in America' was deleted in an amendment.⁸⁷

Concern that immigration from southern Europe threatened the principle of preference to returned soldiers figured prominently in RSL debates and resolutions on immigration. After the Port Augusta sub-branch complained in 1927 that 'aliens' were obtaining preference in employment in Commonwealth government works, the government assured the RSL that 'so far as Commonwealth appointments are concerned the Public Service Act provides that all appointments must be British born or naturalised British subjects'. 'Moreover', it continued, 'that Act also stipulates that

⁸⁶ Congress, 12 November 1924, 15, Central Council Minutes.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 19.

preference must be given to returned soldiers'.⁸⁸ Complaints about employment or preference were usually accompanied by expressions of apprehension lest the 'British way of life' be downgraded by exposure to 'inferior' or 'less developed' cultures and races. The 1927 South Australian sub-branch conference provided a forum for a composite of these fears. A motion supporting British immigration in the first instance, and northern European next, received very broad support.⁸⁹ The conference opposed southern European immigration because such immigrants were supposed to have a low standard of education, would lower the standard of living, would not assimilate or, if they did, would erode the national integrity of the race and the 'Australian character'.⁹⁰ As well, delegates felt that southern Europeans threatened the principle and practice of ex-service preference, and posed competition to the immigration of ex-Imperial servicemen, though no one stated how.⁹¹ Three months later congress confirmed these sentiments by resolving that

⁸⁸ State Council, 8 February 1927, 347, State Council Minutes.

⁸⁹ Sub-branch conference, 28 September 1927, 196-7, 1927 Sub-Branch Conference.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 196-7.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 196-7.

Congress views with alarm the influx of Southern Europeans and considers that an undue proportion of such migrants creates unemployment amongst Australians; tends to lower the standards of Australian living conditions, and to weaken the ties of the Empire. Therefore, it affirms the desirability of the Commonwealth being populated with British stock; furthermore, it requests the Federal Executive to approach the Commonwealth Government either considerably to reduce the present influx, or better still, to suspend it entirely.⁹²

Debate proceeded along similar lines throughout the rest of the decade. In response to a Broken Hill sub-branch motion which hinted at violent confrontations in that town, the South Australian state council resolved in March 1928 to ask the RSL's federal executive to lobby state and federal governments on 'the need for a greater measure of protection for their citizens and we recommend for any foreigner who draws a lethal weapon against an unarmed man, the only penalty shall be immediate deportation to the country whence he came'.⁹³ Increasing calls for restrictions on the immigration of

⁹² State Council, 6 December 1927, 389-90, State Council Minutes.

⁹³ *ibid.*, 21 March 1928, 396.

foreign labour reflected the growing pressure of unemployment. At a state council meeting in June 1928, the Port Pirie delegate successfully moved that 'the Commonwealth Government be asked to place further restriction on Foreigners, especially southern Europeans, from entering Australia, and that a stricter examination in dictation test be made'. He explained that the motion was 'inspired' by the 'Railways Retrenchment', where 'foreigners' were being employed while returned men were being put off.⁹⁴ The federal government, however, had firm ideas about the use of the dictation test. In response to the state council resolution, the Home and Territories Department advised that 'the dictation test provisions of the Immigration Act were never intended to be used as an education test or as a means of excluding persons of European race'. 'The object of the test is to exclude coloured immigrants in pursuance of the "White Australia" policy', it continued, and added:

It is observed that your League realises that delicate international questions are involved in connection with imposing any drastic

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 13 June 1928, 416.

restrictions on alien European immigration into Australia ... The question of the future defence of Australia has also to be considered in view of the restrictive legislation already in force and stringently administered against the admission into Australia of people of Asiatic races.⁹⁵

The RSL's pronouncements on defence and immigration throughout the 1920s make it clear that, although the RSL did realise and appreciate 'delicate international questions', it was prepared to ignore them. The RSL understood, indeed accepted, the relationship between defence and immigration, but eventually that acceptance foundered on the logic of a population increase which could only be achieved at the expense of other cherished RSL ideals. The RSL wanted British immigrants, but they competed for jobs at a time when unemployment was a major concern for returned soldiers. At the same time, there were not enough of them for defence purposes, yet the RSL completely opposed Asian immigration. This attitude impinged on Australia's defence interests not only because of its bearing on population increase, but also because it risked

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 11 September 1928, 438.

alienating that powerful and feared ex-ally, Japan. The RSL's federal executive might recognise, as did the federal government, that increasing Australia's population and fulfilling international obligations meant that some immigration from, for example, southern Europe was necessary, but sub-branches such as those in Port Augusta and Port Pirie never would. The federal executive did not even attempt to overcome this dilemma. It was difficult for the RSL to formulate a policy which addressed the unpalatable consequences of linking immigration and defence. Instead, the RSL talked generally of the need for population, supported British immigration once defence fears overcame economic ones, and called more and more stridently for increased defence spending.

Chapter 6

The RSL, labour, and the 'middle way'

The RSL believed that its members' war service gave it the expertise to comment on all matters relating to defence, but it also maintained that its members had been endowed with a broader vision for Australia's future. Central to this was the idea of the 'middle way'. The RSL argued that Australia's salvation lay in its steering a path between Left and Right, between labour and capital. The RSL's professed adherence to the 'middle way' was an extension of its claim to be 'non-political' and, similarly, related more to theory than practice.

The RSL's success in projecting itself as espousing the 'middle way' was most seriously undermined by its pursuit of absolute preference in employment for returned soldiers, which brought it into direct and frequent conflict with the labour movement. The RSL claimed that it criticised Left and Right with equal frequency and ferocity. In reality few issues stirred the RSL as much as the Labor threat to returned soldier preference, and the scope and direction of its attacks reflected this.

There was, however, common ground between the RSL and the labour movement. RSL lobbying for repatriation benefits aided all returned soldiers, whether members of the RSL or not, including those whose chief allegiance was to the labour movement. In South Australia, for example, the RSL's campaign against what it saw as the arbitrary disbursement of South Australia Soldiers' Fund monies was potentially beneficial to all returned soldiers, RSL members or not. The same was true of RSL concerns about unemployment. Its campaign for the state to provide work for all unemployed veterans helped members and non-members alike. The RSL was greatly concerned about unemployment and believed that the state had a duty to find work for unemployed veterans, but at first it hesitated to criticise conservative governments' retrenchment policies in the same way or with the same vehemence as it criticised Labor governments for threatening preference to returned soldiers. As the economic situation deteriorated, it called more and more for government to provide work for unemployed veterans and, fearing social upheaval, broadened its calls to include work for all unemployed. Although preference remained a source of contention between the

RSL and the labour movement, much of this was blunted by the extent of unemployment. In this way, while the RSL's claim to be seeking the 'middle way' was largely rhetoric and its stand normally right of middle, the reality of a membership comprising a large proportion of 'working' men at a time of acute economic crisis meant that, at least on issues of employment and state intervention, the RSL could sometimes stand left of middle.

The idea of an RSL 'vision' was articulated very early in the organisation's existence. In September 1916 a delegate told the first RSL national congress that the 'mental attitude' of returned soldiers 'towards the normal conditions of civil life' had been 'entirely changed' by their suffering and experience.¹ Ex-servicemen were the best equipped of all Australians to determine the future direction of the country, and the RSL the best instrument through which to do it.² 'United we do more than stand', the national annual report proclaimed in 1920, 'we march forward, a body of Australian ex-soldiers, capable of accomplishing in peace more than ever done on the fields of war'.³ The RSL believed that

¹ *Advertiser*, 25 September 1916.

² *ibid.*

³ *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 February 1921, 23.

war experience had endowed its members with the ability to bypass political and diplomatic grandstanding and resolve problems in a commonsense and personal way. In a letter to *Diggers' Gazette* in December 1919, 'Spion Kop' argued:

We are not dictating to President Wilson, the British Foreign Secretary, or to the Mikado of Japan, but could we not hold a conference of returned soldiers - the men who have to do the fighting and the paying - from Canada, New Zealand, America, Japan, and Australia and have a friendly talk on these matters? ... Even the most fire-eating newspaper editor would have to sit up and take notice.⁴

'Who can doubt', asked the South Australian RSL's 1920 annual report, 'that the returned men of the Empire have the Empire in their hands to make or mar as they choose?'⁵

The most public manifestation of the RSL's idealism was its rhetoric of the 'middle way'. During the war the RSL had been extremely hostile towards the labour movement, but it had attempted to project 'neutrality' by targeting another menace,

⁴ *ibid.*, 1 December 1919, 55.

⁵ *ibid.*, 7 February 1921, 23.

that of the selfish Right. Very often RSL leaders tried to disguise what was actually an attack on the Left by general statements about Australia's national salvation depending on its steering a path between Left and Right. In September 1917 national president W.K. Bolton painted a gloomy picture of Australia:

We are in a condition of industrial strife which is paralysing our efforts for self-defence, which is betraying those brave men who are fighting for us, and which is throwing thousands of women and children in this peaceful country into conditions of suffering, want and poverty ... The greatest need of this country is a happy union of capital and labour joined together in mutual trust, confidence and respect.⁶

The theme gained greater momentum after the war. In January 1919 *R.S.A. Magazine* noted that 'the workers to whom we owe so much, will have to realize their obligations to the remainder of the community; entrenched privilege will also have to understand its indebtedness to the worker and to the

⁶ President's Report, 5 September 1917, 9, Central Council Minutes.

producer'. 'The mean ratio and a common divisor between the two factors must be found', it continued, 'and when representatives of both elements can be brought to a round table in a spirit of sweet reasonableness, a beneficent understanding may be arrived at - without it, chaos will be the logical result'.⁷ Later that year *Diggers' Gazette* warned that, just as the returned soldier had been betrayed by the 'Bolshevik element' while fighting in France, he was now being betrayed by 'the profiteer, the fat merchant, and the middleman-parasite [who] flaunt their wealth and forget the men who bled to protect it'.⁸ 'The industries of the state are at the mercy of strikes and lockouts in other States that periodically close them down', another article lamented, and added that 'profiteering is rife, and the cost of living soars higher and higher'.⁹ And in the 1920 annual report of the South Australian RSL, president A.S. Blackburn blamed industrial strife equally on greedy workers and tight-fisted employers, and rising prices on 'profiteers who never seem to be caught'.¹⁰

⁷ *R.S.A. Magazine*, January 1919, 7.

⁸ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 November 1919, 5-7.

⁹ *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 7 February 1921, 23.

The RSL's attitude to preference in employment undermined its success in projecting an image of an organisation attempting to steer a middle path between 'capital' and 'labour'. Preference to returned soldiers was one of the mainstays of RSL policy in the postwar years. One of its earliest tactics was to stress the differences between veterans and 'stay-at-homes'. The RSL argued, for example, that returned soldiers were entitled to preference in the Commonwealth Public Service because 'the keeping of the Service British and free did not rest with those who remained home but with those who went away to fight'.¹¹ As the war receded, the RSL placed more emphasis on a general demand that returned soldiers be guaranteed economic security in return for the sacrifices they had made during the war. The RSL recognised that only the state could provide such guarantees, and it maintained that it should do so by enshrining in law the principle of absolute preference in employment for returned soldiers. 'The committee had worked hard throughout the year, and used every endeavour to secure unconditional preference to returned soldiers

¹¹ 1919 Congress, *Verbatim Report*, 162, cited in Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 15.

throughout the State', the South Australian branch reported in January 1919. The fight, it continued, 'would be the branch's main objective during the coming year'.¹²

The RSL achieved a degree of success in its efforts. L.L. Robson has noted that 'in the clerical division of the Commonwealth Public Service, 924 out of 972 people appointed to established posts between 1919 and 1932 were returned soldiers'.¹³ The League would have liked to have seen a similar result in the private sector, preferably with government help. 1919 national congress resolved that

... the Federal and State Governments be asked to refuse all Government grants or assistance in Corporate, Civic, or Private Bodies, unless a bonafide is shown to the satisfaction of the RSSILA to give preference to returned soldiers. That this conference of RSSILA [r]equest that the Policy of preference to returned soldiers be given full effect by the State and Federal Governments, thereby ... setting an example to the private employer.¹⁴

¹² *Advertiser*, 21 January 1919.

¹³ Robson, *Australia in the 1920s*, 11.

¹⁴ A.P.K. Morris (a/gen sec RSL) to SA Premier, 31 July 1919, SRSA GRG 24/6/1024.

Although really aimed at non-compliant employers, such policies were bound to bring the RSL into conflict with unions, which were committed to preference in employment for their members. The battle lines for conflict were drawn very early, with both sides adopting a position of no compromise. In January 1919 the secretary of the Port Augusta RSL sub-branch informed the Adelaide branch that he had asked the Waterside Workers Federation for 'their attitude towards returned soldiers', and had 'intimated' that 'while the R.S.&S.I.L. desire to work in harmony with all Unions, we hold that it is optional whether a returned soldier joins a Union or not, and that they are entitled to preference in all employment provided they are suitable'.¹⁵ Isolated incidents of tension between soldiers and unionists occurred throughout 1919 and 1920, particularly in Broken Hill, which came within the domain of the South Australian RSL.¹⁶

The first major clash between the South Australian RSL and unions occurred in the

¹⁵ E. Harding (hon sec Port Augusta RSL sub-branch) to A.R.G. Fearby (sec SA RSL), 20 January 1919, SRSA GRG 24/8/804/18.

¹⁶ See, for example, S.W. Barson (sec Broken Hill RSL sub-branch) to W.J. Henderson (sec RSL), 20 February 1920, NLA MS6609/1/763.

Riverland in 1920, when eight hundred or so members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) employed in developing a government irrigation scheme for returned soldiers in the Berri-Cobdogla area struck for more sanitary working conditions and better wages. Negotiations with the government were unsuccessful and became deadlocked. Fearing that all soldier settlement would have to be delayed until at least the end of the year, a number of returned soldiers awaiting blocks approached the state Minister for Repatriation on 10 June 1920 and suggested that they establish a co-operative scheme. The government agreed, and members of the co-operative elected their own managers and undertook to work for the government on a petty contract scheme.¹⁷

The AWU, greatly alarmed by this turn of events, immediately demanded that the Minister of Agriculture grant its members preference on Murray works.¹⁸ When the RSL found out about this, it demanded 'that the recent request of an A.W.U. deputation for preference to members of that organisation shall not be granted, but that the Government should maintain their policy of preference to

¹⁷ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 June 1920, 12-16, 1 September 1920, 12.

¹⁸ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 July 1920, 20.

returned soldiers'.¹⁹ The government responded by reiterating that 'preference to unionists of any particular union was not Government policy, and preference to returned soldiers was'. It agreed also to try to complete the project by piece-work.²⁰ In August, a number of returned soldiers drew up a constitution for a Soldiers' Co-operative Scheme which stated that

membership shall be confined to returned soldiers working on the developmental works under our own control, whether blockers, intending blockers, or otherwise. Preference of employment to be given in the following order:-

- 1/ Returned soldiers who intend to select blocks
- 2/ Blockers who are returned soldiers
- 3/ Returned men generally
- 4/ Civilian labour.²¹

Work proceeded this way, with occasional incidents which the RSL blamed on 'union agitators' and 'returned soldier malcontents'²², until the issue was raised in Parliament by the Labor opposition in February 1921. Labor leader John Gunn

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, 1 September 1920, 13.

²² *ibid.*, 15 September 1920, 49.

announced in the House of Assembly that he was not in favour of the piece-work system used on the River Murray Co-operative Scheme.²³ In reply *Diggers' Gazette* defined the main point at issue as 'whether, presuming that the work is being done better and cheaper under piece rates' - a presumption which was probably immaterial to the RSL - 'and that the Scheme is assisting the soldier to settle on his block quicker than he would do under the old scheme ... the Labor party [is] justified in opposing it'. Then, perhaps in an attempt to placate those with Labor sympathies, the magazine advised readers that 'it must not be understood that the League favours the piece-work principle as against day work':

It does not. It has no definite principle at all ... it supports the scheme because it brings benefit to the soldier.²⁴

The Murray dispute is an example of how easily the RSL's professed desire to tread the middle path could become unstuck. It maintained that neither union membership nor union preference were in themselves bad

²³ *ibid.*, 7 February 1921, 5-6.

²⁴ *ibid.*

things. A.S. Blackburn, for example, was loath to advise returned soldiers not to join unions²⁵, and was on record as stating that 'he was not opposed to preference to unionists'.²⁶ The trouble was that while the RSL might support in principle preference for unionists, it firmly believed that preference for returned soldiers came first. A *Diggers' Gazette* editorial in July 1920 maintained that 'returned soldiers did not want to say that a man should not belong to any union, but they did want preference granted to soldiers'.²⁷ *Diggers' Gazette* was actually saying that this was an issue on which the RSL would not negotiate.

The South Australian RSL's strong stand on preference formed part of a national campaign against what the RSL saw as a determined effort by the labour movement to erode the principle of returned soldier preference. This campaign was directed particularly at New South Wales Labor government moves to withdraw support for a Preference to Returned Soldiers Bill. A motion to the March 1921 Labor Party Annual Conference in Sydney described the bill as

²⁵ See, for example, *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 July 1920, 16.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 15 July 1920, 11.

'the means of creating dissension between the great body of workers who have families to support and single, fit men, who have no desire to accept or pursue constant employment, as we contend the last body of returned soldiers have repatriated themselves and are not sympathetic towards those who are unemployed'.²⁸ *Diggers' Gazette* immediately labelled the move as the 'thin end of the wedge', adding that the bill was 'very mild compared with what soldiers have a right to expect'. The magazine claimed that the RSL 'takes no political sides when it emphatically denounces any attempt to abolish the "preference to soldiers' principle"', and continued:

There are many members of the ALP amongst the soldiers' ranks who will strongly oppose this motion. It is contrary to one of the great principles of the League. Moreover, it is contrary to one of the great principles which every returned soldier holds, namely, that soldiers, who risked their all for their country's sake, should get preference of employment over those who did not.²⁹

²⁸ *ibid.*, 7 January 1921, 8.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 8. See also State Council, 14 September 1920, 59, State Council Minutes.

In its opposition to the NSW Labor Party's stance, the RSL developed a line of argument which it continued to reiterate throughout the 1920s. W.D. Price, who succeeded A.S. Blackburn as South Australian president in 1921, voiced the argument in his inaugural presidential address. Referring to the NSW Labor Party, he stated that 'the League had no politics, but when a political body set out to oppose the main plank in the League's platform, they would fight that body'.³⁰ He then turned his attention to the trouble on the Riverland blocks. 'Some of the militant unionists - mostly the organisers - were against the League', he said, and continued:

Unions and the League both had their own functions in South Australia ... he ... was not criticizing the dinkum unionists, but the militant members of the O.B.U. Of the 30,000 (South Australian) men who had gone to the war, approximately 15,000 were unionists ... He urged Diggers to go back to their unions and to take a personal interest in unionism. The League had never fought the unions, and he hoped they never would.³¹

³⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 January 1921, 10.

³¹ *ibid.*, 10-11.

Returning to this theme later in the year, Price claimed that he had advised 'diffident' returned soldiers to 'go back to your union - take an interest in matters affecting it', and 'watch its administration'. 'By your vote and your influence', he advised, 'see that the right type of man is in control'.³²

Price urged veterans to join unions so that they could influence union policy, but he avoided the question of veterans who joined unions because they owed some loyalty to the union movement. How were such men to reconcile the opposing loyalties that might arise? Just as the RSL defined an issue as 'political' when it suited and 'non-political' when it did not, it argued now that it was not 'opposing' or 'fighting' labour when it was doing just that. In June 1921 RSL federal secretary F.E. Forrest argued that although there 'has certainly been particular trouble with the Governments in some of the States', this did not mean that the RSL was 'in any way opposed to the tenets of their political faith'. These governments had attracted criticism, he maintained, 'merely because on repeated occasions [they] have condoned the non-observance of certain principles which are

³² Sun, 30 July 1921.

vital to the interests of the returned soldier'. Forrest concluded:

A new [New South Wales] Government has now come into office, and has threatened that it will wipe the Preference Act off the Statute Book. That Government happens to be Labour [sic]. It is not fair to say, however, that the League is in consequence anti-Labour. The League is pro-soldier, and is therefore opposed to those parties or interests which stand in the way of the League's ideals.³³

The South Australian branch argued similarly. When in mid 1920 the Sydney *Bulletin* accused the state branch of not being even handed in its criticism of political parties which implemented policies adversely affecting soldiers, *Diggers' Gazette* replied that 'the League all over Australia has been tearing into governments, irrespective of their party'. Indeed, it continued, the RSL had often 'torn into' the South Australian Liberal government. 'If any government, Liberal, Nationalist, or Labor, runs counter to a League principle', it said, 'it can expect the League to "tear into it"'. It noted that when state delegates went to

³³ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 June 1921, 11.

Brisbane congress later in the year, they intended 'to "tear into" the New South Wales Labor Government because it refuses to give preference of employment to soldiers'.³⁴ It did not, however, cite any comparable examples of the RSL's 'tearing into' conservative governments. Few issues stirred the RSL as much as the Labor threat to returned soldier preference.

Despite the conflict that the issue of preference engendered, the RSL and the labour movement could cooperate. G.L. Kristianson has noted that, despite the labour movement's suspicion of the RSL, 'even the labour movement contributed to a more sympathetic environment [for returned soldiers] through its support of repatriation measures which would help the working man who had gone away to fight'.³⁵ The labour movement was aware of this common ground. In July 1919 the South Australian labour newspaper *Daily Herald* wrote at length of its attitudes toward and expectations of the RSL. Although it argued that repatriation 'should not be left to the soldiers' organisations to see that justice is done' to returned soldiers and their dependents, it acknowledged that 'history has

³⁴ *ibid.*, 7 July 1921, 5.

³⁵ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 14-15.

shown that unless the soldiers themselves stand together for their rights there is grave danger of these rights being overlooked'.³⁶ The *Daily Herald* also emphasised the role the working man had played, first in the AIF and then in the RSL. It was an 'incontestable fact', it said, that the 'great majority of the men who fought in the war were enlisted from the ranks of the workers'.³⁷ But it warned that an association which meddled in politics, and which sought to define and combat 'the enemy within' instead of concentrating on improving the condition of its members through an appeal to the state for better working conditions, would inevitably become wrecked on party grounds. 'The section of the organisation concerned with the enemy within', it continued, was 'usually in occupation of the executive offices' and 'was not quite in sympathy with the "plain men" of the organisation'.³⁸

The *Daily Herald* believed, of course, that it was the Labor Party, and not the others, which had the true interests of soldiers at heart. Appealing to soldiers'

³⁶ *Daily Herald*, 15 July 1919.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

pride in the AIF as an army of volunteers, it argued that veterans

have seen that Australia under voluntary methods did more than her share, and that those volunteers [who] left the factory, the mine, and the farm in many instances without previous military experience, were able to hold up and defeat the first-class, highly trained professional conscript troops of Germany ... the 'diggers' will find that there will be no party more ready to help them in their demands for justice than the Labor Party ... the party which had a stronger direct representation in the AIF than any other ...³⁹

The references to the war served another purpose. Returned soldiers were going to face another 'battle', a battle to obtain justice. The veteran would join cause with the worker (when they were not one and the same) who had always had to stand ready to repel the onslaught of greedy capitalists and profiteers. Threats to labour such as lockouts, 'coloured immigration', profiteering, and declining living standards were threats to returned soldiers too. A new alliance based both on common interest and

³⁹ *ibid.*

the links forged and strengthened by war would lead soldiers and workers together into the difficult postwar years.⁴⁰ There was no time to waste. The RSL, the *Daily Herald* argued, could

deal effectively with such cases as those exposed in 'The Herald' a few days ago, where the sugar growers frankly admitted that they preferred alien coloured labour to the returned soldier. They could deal effectively also with those companies and concerns which have so flagrantly amassed immense profits while the war was on, and are still doing it. They could effectively deal with landholders who have threatened to shoot anybody who attempted to take any portion of 'their' land for the purpose of settling returned soldiers.⁴¹

The *Daily Herald* concluded by warning the RSL that the time of public sympathy and official benevolence would quickly wane. 'Hero worship of the kind indulged in by the noisy "patrioteers"', it predicted, 'turns to half hearted "sympathy" when the war is over'.⁴²

The crux of the constructive relationship between the RSL and the labour

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

movement lay in the fact that, apart from direct assistance such as preference and pensions, assistance to returned soldiers could assume indirect means, such as government assistance to industries, regulation against profiteering, and combating inflation and unemployment. That the latter was helpful to all workers, returned soldiers or not, was lost on neither the RSL nor the labour movement. The RSL lobbied strongly for 'indirect' assistance. In 1919 it proposed levying a direct tax on wealth and so-called 'war fortunes'.⁴³ That year, national congress endorsed 'the principle of co-operation by which wage-earners shall participate in the profits won in whole or in part from their labour'.⁴⁴ Another resolution supported the introduction of a 'wise' (i.e. protective) tariff for industries, 'thus creating new avenues for the unemployment [sic] of Returned Sailors and Soldiers'.⁴⁵ In November 1919 V.C. Blunden, editor of *Diggers' Gazette*, complained that the state repatriation department dealt unequally with men of different callings. He claimed that

⁴³ *Diggers' Gazette*, v. 1, n. 1, 23.

⁴⁴ *Advertiser*, 23 July 1919.

⁴⁵ Congress, 21 July 1919, 1, Central Council Minutes.

labourers, because of their number, were forced to take jobs as offered and their sustenance subsequently stopped. Accountants and managers, however, were given maximum assistance, and university students were given money to continue their studies.⁴⁶

Certain kinds of strike could unify the RSL and the labour movement too. While strikes were sometimes caused by clashes between returned soldiers and unionists, or affected the progress of soldier settlement, most did not have a direct impact on matters of particular sensitivity to veterans. Most involved returned soldiers acting within unions, not outside them, and centred around issues such as better working conditions and wages. In these cases, veterans who had returned to their unions, as Price had urged, were usually entirely in sympathy with their fellow unionists' demands. Unlike their fellow unionists, though, they were likely to feel doubly aggrieved. As unionists their demands were resisted by employers, and very often the government. As returned soldiers, they were being denied both work and a reasonable living, things to which they believed they were especially entitled by virtue of their war service.

⁴⁶ *Diggers' Gazette*, v. 1, n. 1, 35-7.

In these cases, returned soldiers did not dissociate themselves from their fellow strikers or their cause, but instead directed their hostility towards the official and semi-official agencies they believed were denying them their rights as returned soldiers and unionists. Such agencies included the Repatriation Department and 'patriotic' organisations like the South Australian Soldiers' Fund (SASF). The attitudes of both towards returned soldiers put out of work by strikes became very clear soon after the war had ended. The repatriation authorities distinguished between workers who actively participated in strikes, and those who were 'involuntarily' affected by them. At a meeting of the State Repatriation Board in July 1919, the deputy comptroller considered a public query which asked whether sustenance was being paid to returned soldiers out of work because of a strike. He 'reported that under instructions from Headquarters payment of Sustenance was only being made to men who were involuntarily out of work as the result of the strike'.⁴⁷

The SASF was even more strict. It resisted any demands on its purse which it

⁴⁷ Repatriation State Board, 17 July 1919, Minutes of the Repatriation State Board, Australian Archives, Adelaide, AP286/4.

believed to be contrary to the spirit in which the money was raised during the war. Sustenance was disbursed on a case-by-case basis according to the perceived needs and 'merit' of the applicant, both of which were determined by the fund. In February 1920 its Emergency Relief Committee considered the problem of 'general unemployment', and concluded that it was obliged to 'continue to assist in genuine cases of unemployment caused through no fault of the individual applicant, but such assistance should be kept on a bedrock basis'.⁴⁸ As applicants for relief began to multiply, the SASF redefined its policy. When the Emergency Relief Committee received a number of applications from Port Pirie veterans 'for assistance on account of unemployment', it decided that 'the Fund cannot make grants for unemployment arising out of industrial troubles'.⁴⁹ This policy was reiterated in August 1921 in response to a letter from the Port Pirie town clerk 'complaining that discrimination had been shown against Port Pirie in regard to assistance to returned men and asking that the position be further considered'. The committee resolved that

⁴⁸ Emergency Relief Committee, 23 February 1920, 387, SASF Minutes.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 1 February 1921, 456.

... a reply be sent pointing out that there was no discrimination against Port Pirie as soldiers and their dependants were entitled to the same assistance there as in the City [i.e. Adelaide] or other parts of the State. In declining to grant unemployment assistance at Port Pirie, the Fund was only carrying out its policy not to assist where the unemployment is caused through industrial unrest.⁵⁰

This attitude, indeed the SASF's very existence, greatly angered the RSL. It continued to mount frequent public attacks on the SASF's disbursement policy and campaigned vigorously for direct representation on its board, the only way it felt it could gain control over the policy. When deputations to the SASF failed⁵¹, it turned its attention to the government. In November 1921 T.P. Wood from South Australia moved at a meeting of the RSL federal executive that 'the Commonwealth Government be asked by means of legislation to enforce the supply of returns by the Trustees and Committees of all State

⁵⁰ Executive Committee, 30 August 1921, 499, SASF Minutes.

⁵¹ See, for example, Executive Committee, 5 May 1921, 470-71, SASF Minutes. A former South Australian RSL secretary, A.R.G. Fearby, had by this time gained a seat on the committee, but in an individual, not official, capacity.

and local patriotic and memorial funds - other than the Red Cross - of the outstanding balances of all such funds, and that the State Governments be asked to pass legislation immediately to vest control of the funds in respective State Executives of the League as the body most identified with post war problems affecting the returned soldier'.⁵² In 1922, national congress resolved that the South Australian state board should 'take steps for the League to control the administrators of the South Australian Soldiers' Fund and all similar funds raised for patriotic purposes'.⁵³

All the state board could do, however, was to continue lobbying. The state government, while not prepared to go so far as handing the RSL control of patriotic funds, was prepared to allow the RSL some responsibility in the area of employment. In 1921 the South Australian Repatriation Department transferred its labour bureau to the RSL. The RSL immediately notified the SASF and asked for £100 towards establishing the bureau. It also asked that 'in the event of men being sent to employment in the country the Fund would undertake to issue

⁵² Federal Executive, 2 November 1921, 1, Central Council Minutes.

⁵³ *Digger*, 22 September 1922, 43.

free railway warrants upon the League's recommendation'.⁵⁴ The SASF refused both requests on the grounds that 'the assistance required did not come within the scope of their administration'.⁵⁵ The RSL continued to lobby the SASF and the government. In October 1921 South Australian RSL secretary R.G. 'Bob' Woodhead wrote to premier H.N. Barwell to advocate using SASF money for job creation schemes. 'The Soldiers' Fund should undertake necessary public works and employ soldiers in connection therewith', Woodhead argued, 'paying them wages instead of giving grants of money for no return as they in some cases do at present'. 'Another means by which the Soldiers' Fund could assist in overcoming difficulties in connection with unemployed returned soldiers', he continued, 'is by financial assistance to establish small industries or by grants for tools of trade to individual soldiers'.⁵⁶ Barwell forwarded Woodhead's letter to the SASF for comment, and in due course Barwell's office replied that 'the moneys entrusted to the administration can in no case be used for carrying out public works, nor for the

⁵⁴ Executive Committee, 30 August 1921, 499, SASF Minutes.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 499.

⁵⁶ Woodhead to Barwell, 17 October 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/855.

establishment of small industries as suggested by your League'.⁵⁷

The RSL's willingness to control the labour bureau, and its attempt to obtain a grant from the SASF to create jobs and assist returned men to find work, reflected its growing concern about the state of the economy in general and the plight of unemployed returned soldiers in particular. The 1920 Royal Commission on the Basic Wage found that the actual cost of living according to 'reasonable standards of comforts' had risen by 62.54% in Adelaide since 1914. It also showed that 'hardship and destitution were features of the lives of many Australians in the immediate post-war period'.⁵⁸ Unemployment was also increasing. In September 1921 South Australian Labor opposition leader John Gunn estimated that there were between 2000 and 3000 unemployed workers in the metropolitan district of Adelaide alone, although he added that only about 1000 showed on government labour bureau returns. Of this last number, he claimed, between two and three hundred were returned soldiers.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Secretary to Premier to Woodhead, 11 November 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/855.

⁵⁸ Ray Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers*, St. Lucia, Queensland., 1978, 2.

⁵⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 September 1921, 8.

The RSL did not dispute the figure, and *Diggers' Gazette* turned again and again to the problem of unemployed returned soldiers. In July 1921 it quoted a Prospect sub-section complaint 'that there is at present a large number of unemployed returned soldiers'⁶⁰, while in August it reported that the state board 'is making a special appeal to the Chamber of Commerce, in view of the large number of unemployed returned soldiers, to ask it to urge its members to employ returned men wherever possible'.⁶¹ Later in the same issue it reminded readers that 'some time ago, in these columns, reference was made to "the spectre of unemployment" which was fast approaching', and continued that 'the spectre has now arrived, and the Government is at its wits' end to know how to deal with it'.⁶²

It was not only that unemployment brought hardship to the unemployed. Many people, returned soldiers among them, believed that unemployment threatened the stability of the existing social order. The RSL readily referred to this threat. In March 1920 *Diggers' Gazette* warned that 'the Government might as well run a factory for the manufacture of Bolsheviks, for there is

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 21 July 1921, 9.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 7 August 1921, 7.

⁶² *ibid.*, 9.

only one way to make Bolsheviks, and that is to prevent men from making a decent livelihood'.⁶³ In August 1921 it called for bipartisan action in defeating the dangers of unemployment, maintaining that unemployment was 'one of, if not the greatest of curses that can fall upon a country':

Unemployment brings dissatisfaction against the existing order of things - against lawful government and the whole fabric of our society on which civilization is based. It is one of the reasons why the ranks of the anarchists have been augmented.⁶⁴

Although the South Australian RSL was unable to conceal its anxiety at the likely results of proposed government retrenchments, and readily admitted that returned soldiers would be among the first to be affected, it hesitated to 'tear into' Barwell's Liberal government in the same way as it 'tore into' Labor governments about preference. It was careful to ensure that its concern for the increasing number of unemployed veterans did not sound like support for the Labor opposition. When in mid-1921 Barwell announced that he intended to reduce wages to

⁶³ *ibid.*, 15 March 1920, 5.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 7 August 1921, 26.

government employees because such reduction would reduce proportionately the cost of living, *Diggers' Gazette* commended his 'courage' in expressing 'his views publicly and openly'.⁶⁵ By avoiding comment on whether Barwell's proposals were right or wrong or, more to the point, whether it agreed with them or not, *Diggers' Gazette* tacitly supported his policy. All it did do was to express concern that some employers were taking advantage of employees during the current economic climate by demanding that prospective employees work longer hours at lower than the legal minimum wage.⁶⁶

Diggers' Gazette found it harder to avoid criticising government policy after retrenchments did take place. In August 1921 *Diggers' Gazette* reported that 'the Premier's threat to retrench and lay off men engaged on public works has been realised'. The ensuing article, pointedly initialled by editor H.V. Millington to distinguish it from official RSL opinion, maintained that this was a result of 'the economic crisis and other incidents over which the Government has no control'. But, he said, 'hundreds of unemployed, including many returned soldiers,

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 21 July 1921, 27-28.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 27-28.

are now walking the streets looking for work', and he hinted that this same government had an obligation to provide work.⁶⁷ 'Dark rumours', he warned, 'are floating around Adelaide that unless something definite is done to provide work for the workers, direct action will be taken'.⁶⁸

It is not clear whether Millington and RSL leaders actually believed that the unemployed threatened society's stability, or whether they saw the threat as a useful weapon in the pleading for members. It is probable that they believed in the one and took advantage of the other, in much the same way as the RSL had used the recruiting issue during the war to extract repatriation concessions from the government, or the spectre of returned soldier violence to woo government recognition. It is clear that returned soldiers felt that work, like pensions, hospital care, and preference in employment, was their right, and that it was the state's responsibility to provide it. In August 1921 a deputation of about one hundred unemployed veterans asked state RSL secretary Bob Woodhead to lobby the government and

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 21 August 1921, 26.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

employers for work. The deputation, the *Daily Herald* reported, 'wanted the officials of the R.S.[L.] to impress upon the government that as they had taken many men from employment to go to the war it was now their duty to find employment for them'.⁶⁹ The following month president W.D. Price duly approached Barwell and requested assistance in securing work for unemployed veterans. Price did not argue on grounds of state obligation, but on those of social stability. When men were unable to find work, he told Barwell, 'they were liable to become susceptible to the influence of agitators, who attempted to use them for their own political ends'. When men are unemployed, he continued, 'that is the moment when the unscrupulous revolutionary, who is out to secure assistance for his own political ends, attempts to catch them in his trap and fill them up with visionary tales of what they can accomplish if they will only stick to him'.⁷⁰

There were firm limits to what the conservative government was prepared to do. Barwell argued that his government would not take 'temporary' measures to combat unemployment because such measures would, in

⁶⁹ *Daily Herald*, 17 August 1921, clipping in SRSA GRG 24/6/855.

⁷⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 October 1921, 3-4.

the long term, only increase the problem. He told an RSL deputation:

The whole position was due to conditions over which the Government had little or no control and South Australia was in a better position because it was not endeavouring to apply remedies, which although they might give some immediate relief would only aggravate the position in the long run and increase the ultimate unemployment.⁷¹

The RSL did not want to wait for 'the long run'. In assuming control of the Repatriation Department's employment bureau, the RSL consciously assumed the role of surrogate state. 'It is the State's duty to find work for the digger', *Diggers' Gazette* contended in August 1921, 'but in view of the fact that the State is unable to fulfil its obligations, the League has stepped into the breach and will do its utmost to see that the digger realises his modest demand - work'.⁷²

But the battle seemed a losing one, as illustrated by two contrasting examples from records of the RSL's employment bureau. In February 1922 *Diggers' Gazette* reported that

⁷¹ Deputation to Barwell, 7 October 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/855.

⁷² *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 August 1921, 3.

in the three months after 1 September 1921, when the RSL assumed responsibility for it, the bureau registered 1055 men. Of these, 400 had been placed, 437 had had their registrations cancelled for failing to report regularly to the bureau, and 218 remained to be placed.⁷³ In January 1931, the state board heard that, during the previous month, 4 men had been placed and 1485 were on the register.⁷⁴

As the League's labour bureau became less able to find positions for unemployed veterans, it increased its pressure for the government to assume full responsibility for employing returned soldiers through job creation schemes. There was, however, a change of emphasis. In the midst of increasing unemployment in the middle to late 1920s⁷⁵, the RSL's concerns about social stability led it to call for the government to alleviate the distress of all unemployed, not just returned soldiers. Instead of arguing that returned soldiers were entitled to work and that the government was obliged

⁷³ *ibid.*, 7 February 1922, 18.

⁷⁴ State Board, 5 January 1931, 1018, Minutes of the South Australian Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia State Board, RSL State Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter State Board Minutes).

⁷⁵ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 198.

therefore to find employment for them, a good thing for both returned soldiers and the community, the RSL insisted that the community's welfare demanded that the government provide work for all unemployed, a good thing for the community and, because they formed part of that community, for returned soldiers too.

For example, 1924 national congress's demands to the federal government on unemployment had been restricted to calls for work to be provided for disabled veterans; 'it is primarily the business of the State and Federal Governments to provide employment for disabled soldiers', a delegate moved successfully⁷⁶, while another successfully called on state branches to prepare evidence to present to the Royal Commission on National Insurance 'with a view to the introduction of legislation placing an obligation upon employers to employ disabled Returned Soldiers'.⁷⁷ By the end of the decade, calls for government intervention were much broader. At a South Australian state council meeting in 1928, for example, delegate Reverend Bulbeck said that he was alarmed at the growing number of unemployed

⁷⁶ Congress, 11 November 1924, 9, Central Council Minutes.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 12 November 1924, 12.

returned soldiers, and of the unemployed in the community generally, and moved successfully that the RSL inform the government that it believed that relief should be in the form of expenditure on public works to absorb unemployment.⁷⁸ RSL state secretary A.H. Dalziel conveyed this resolution to premier Richard Butler in May 1928, adding that 'the men prefer work to charity, and by working they will provide an asset in tangible form as a result of their labour, whereas the charitable assistance now being given, though being very highly appreciated by the men concerned, is an outlay which produces no return to the body granting such assistance'.⁷⁹ At a state council meeting in June 1928, a councillor who was also a district council clerk related how the state government had sent letters to local councils asking them to give men work. This was 'absolute cheek', he said. The councils were in just as precarious a financial position as the state and federal governments, and 'when the Govt. of the country cannot assist, then it should not be

⁷⁸ State Council, 21 March 1928, 393, State Council Minutes.

⁷⁹ Dalziel to Butler, 4 May 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/132.

thrust upon the local governing bodies to provide employment'.⁸⁰

The RSL's refusal to accept as 'charity' something it believed its members were due as a right, and its extension of this to include provision of work as the state's duty to all its unemployed, indicated an attitude which was anathema to conservatives. Despite the report of the Royal Commission on National Insurance, which called on the government to take positive measures to prevent unemployment and suggested that government bodies provide work for the unemployed paid at the basic wage, the federal government omitted any provision for unemployment in its 1928 National Insurance Bill. Brian Dickey has argued that this 'ensured (unintentionally) ... that the existing inadequate patchwork of state government arrangements and charitable society activities would be left to cope with the depression soon to engulf the nation'.⁸¹ Ray Broomhill has insisted that W.K. Hancock's assertion that 'Australian democracy has come to look upon the State as a vast public utility whose duty it is to provide the

⁸⁰ State Council, 13 June 1928, 426, State Council Minutes.

⁸¹ Brian Dickey, *No Charity There*, Melbourne, 1980, 148.

greatest happiness for the greatest number' is not supported by the experience of the Depression in Adelaide, where there is little evidence that public welfare measures were ever accepted as a right rather than a charity.⁸²

While RSL support for the unemployed in the face of conservative opposition increased the chances of some kind of rapprochement with the labour movement, none seemed possible as long as the fundamental problem of preference remained. In 1924 the RSL identified the Royal Commission on National Insurance as a suitable forum for further pressure to secure 'preference in employment for Returned Soldiers generally'.⁸³ In late 1927 the South Australian RSL moved to protect the principle of absolute preference to returned soldiers amid retrenchments in the South Australian Railways (SAR). President W.F.J. McCann told a December 1927 state council meeting 'there is no doubt that our Policy of Preference to Returned Soldiers clashes with the Union's principle of preference to Unionists', but the meeting

⁸² Ray Broomhill, 'On the Dole in Adelaide During the Great Depression', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, n. 1, 1975, 34.

⁸³ Congress, 12 November 1924, 12, Central Council Minutes.

resolved nevertheless 'that we continue to demand the full recognition of the Policy of Preference to Returned Soldiers on the part of officials of the S.A.R. and other Government Departments'.⁸⁴

The RSL was unable at first to understand what caused the 'erosion' it thought it detected in the principle of preference to returned soldiers. For answers it looked to veterans who had not joined the RSL, or had left it. President McCann told state council in December 1927 that 'the Returned men have got themselves to blame to a certain extent, because if they had stuck to the League, we would have been sufficiently strong to demand Preference to Returned Soldiers, and they would perhaps have still had their jobs, and I think the only solution seems to be to organise and get more members into the League'.⁸⁵ As the Depression hit harder, the RSL admitted that unemployment and retrenchment had brought about an apparent, if temporary, reconciliation of opposing claims for preference. In 1930 national congress resolved that, in cases where returned soldiers had to be retrenched, unmarried

⁸⁴ State Council, 6 December 1927, 377-78, State Council Minutes.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 378.

returned soldiers who were not unionists were to go first, followed by unmarried returned soldiers who were unionists, then married returned soldiers who were non-unionists, and finally married soldiers who were unionists.⁸⁶ This was an important concession at the national level. 'Returned from active service' had ceased to become the sole criterion for preference and had instead been placed on nearly an equal footing with both conjugal condition and union membership.

Not all RSL branches were happy with this. The South Australian RSL responded by demanding that the federal office take 'action' to 'restore preference to returned soldiers as originally provided under the Act'.⁸⁷ But even South Australia had to accept compromises. In September 1932 the annual sub-branch conference resolved that candidates seeking election to Parliament be asked whether they were 'in favour of a substantial measure of preference to Returned Soldiers'.⁸⁸ The times when candidates could be asked to endorse the principle of absolute preference had passed. Although the preference claims of the RSL and the labour

⁸⁶ State Board, 9 June 1931, 1092, State Board Minutes.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 7 March 1933, 1378.

movement seemed fundamentally irreconcilable, the reality of hard times blunted conflict. Increased competition for the same number or fewer jobs could cause heightened tension, as happened in the immediate postwar years, but large-scale unemployment resulted in the opposite. The principle of preference in employment depended on employment existing in the first place. When there were no jobs, unionists and veterans were no longer adversaries but co-unemployed.

RSL concessions on preference did not represent any victory for the labour movement, for without work no victory was possible. In any case, the Depression weakened the union movement. Between 1929 and 1931 union membership fell about 16%, and at June 1931 unemployment among unionists stood officially at 27.6%. Unions could not take action to prevent wage cuts or to procure better conditions when their very survival was at stake.⁸⁹ Even apparent gains at federal government level were illusory. As a volunteer worker said in December 1930, when prime minister Scullin used the Transport Workers Act to re-establish preference in employment for members of the Waterside

⁸⁹ Peter Cook, 'Labor and the Premiers' Plan', *Labour History*, n. 17, 1970, 107-8.

Workers Federation, 'in practice ... because there was so little work on the wharves, Federation members gained little benefit from the Government's action; most were still unemployed'.⁹⁰

The relationship between unions, volunteer workers and the RSL, particularly in regard to the rise of conservative paramilitary organisations in the late 1920s and early 1930s, has received much attention.⁹¹ In South Australia, attention on right-wing paramilitary groups has centred on the 'special constabulary' first formed in 1928 to protect volunteer workers during the nationwide strike by the Waterside Workers Federation. Unlike the New Guard, which was formed to oppose the New South Wales Lang government, the South Australian special constabulary was formed and actively supported by the state Liberal government of Richard Butler. On 11 September 1928 Butler had cabled Prime Minister S.M. Bruce that waterside workers were refusing to work under

⁹⁰ *Sappers on Service: Being the Field Service Diary of the Brigade Engineer Company, Citizens' Defence Force Brigade (Special Constabulary)*, Adelaide, 1928, 132.

⁹¹ See, for example, Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', 157, McQueen, 'The Social Character of the New Guard', 70-71, and W. Tully, 'The New Guard of New South Wales, 1931-1932', History IV thesis, Australian National University, 1974, 1.

an award condition introduced by Justice Beeby which required them to attend twice-daily pick-ups.⁹² Butler had indicated that his government was prepared to 'provide necessary protection' if voluntary labour was used to load wool.⁹³

The 'necessary' protection, in the form of special constables in a 'Citizens' Defence Brigade', was drawn mainly from an organisation calling itself the Essential Services Maintenance Volunteers (ESMV). Established by A.S. Blackburn in September 1928, it claimed to have the support 'of a number of leading business-men'.⁹⁴ The *Advertiser* reported on 20 September that the ESVM 'had not organised with the purpose of interfering with or trying to break any strike; but if the government decided that they required help to maintain law and order or to carry on essential public services, they desired to have such help at hand'.⁹⁵ By 18 September it had enrolled about 1000 members.⁹⁶ After 'serious' rioting on the

⁹² Butler to Bruce, 11 September 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865; Radi, '1920-29', 411.

⁹³ Butler to Bruce, 11 September 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865.

⁹⁴ R.N. Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928 to 1932', MA thesis, University of Adelaide, 1973, 21-22.

⁹⁵ *Advertiser*, 20 September 1928.

⁹⁶ Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928 to 1932', 21-22.

waterfront on 27 September⁹⁷, a special cabinet meeting was called and the government 'accepted the previous offer of assistance made by the Essential Services Maintenance Volunteers, whose members were requested to report for service immediately'.⁹⁸ On 28 September, the Citizens' Defence Brigade was created under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel W.C.N. Waite.⁹⁹ About 1200 civilians, as well as the regular police, were 'on duty' on the waterfront between 29 September and 10 October.¹⁰⁰

Heading the police force at the time was war hero Brigadier-General Raymond Leane. Leane's association with the military began in 1905 when, at the age of twenty-seven, he was commissioned in the 11th (Perth Rifles) Infantry Regiment. A successful merchant before the war, Leane enlisted in the 11th Battalion in August 1914 as a captain and company commander. He served with distinction on Gallipoli, and was promoted temporary major in August. The following month he was appointed to command the 11th Battalion and

⁹⁷ *Sappers on Service*, 5.

⁹⁸ Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928-1932', 37.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰⁰ Leane to Chief Secretary, 22 October 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865.

was promoted temporary lieutenant-colonel in October.¹⁰¹

In February 1916 'Bull' Leane was confirmed as major and appointed commander of the 48th Battalion. A month later he was promoted lieutenant-colonel, and led his battalion in 1916 and 1917 at Fleurbaix, Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Gueudecourt, Bullecourt, Messines, Wytschaete and Passchendaele. He was wounded in October 1917 and did not return to duty until January 1918. In April he was appointed temporary colonel commanding the 12th Brigade and confirmed in rank and promoted temporary brigadier general in June. Throughout 1918 the 48th Battalion played a decisive role in many engagements.¹⁰²

Leane's commission with the AIF was terminated in January 1920. He continued his association with the military after the war, becoming one of those many officers such as Rosenthal and Elliott in the citizen forces between the world wars who were of comparatively high rank, notable commanders, and in a great majority compared to those of

¹⁰¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 10, 40.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 40-41.

the permanent army.¹⁰³ Leane was also typical of former high ranking officers of the AIF in that he did not join the RSL, possibly because of its image as an enlisted men's and junior officers' organisation. Like other former high ranking officers, Leane was a prominent member of Legacy.¹⁰⁴

Leane was appointed South Australian police commissioner in May 1920. Tall with a 'square shouldered frame, immense jaw' and 'tightly compressed lips', highly decorated (including the Distinguished Service Order and Bar, Military Cross and the French Croix de Guerre), a man of 'firm discipline and high sense of duty'¹⁰⁵, 'Bull' Leane was not someone to be taken lightly. Indeed, while the police officers under his command came to see him as 'just and sensitive'¹⁰⁶, 'leftists' and the unemployed would have judged him differently. During the Depression he 'ruthlessly' curbed demonstrations by the unemployed¹⁰⁷, and was strongly anti-communist. As early as 1921 he wrote that

¹⁰³ A.J. Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 1978, 201.

¹⁰⁴ Sol Encel, *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Melbourne, 1972, 477.

¹⁰⁵ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 10, 41.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 41.

'unsupervised' street speakers and public orators could 'undermine constitutional government'; in fact, he did not believe that those preaching social revolution should be permitted to speak publicly at all.¹⁰⁸

Leane claimed publicly that the Citizens' Defence Brigade comprised 'citizens from every profession and trade'¹⁰⁹, but in a letter of 10 October he informed the Chief Secretary that the special constables were 'mostly drawn from the professional and business community'.¹¹⁰ A small pamphlet written later by a Citizens' Defence Brigade volunteer commented on the 'unusual sight' of 'hundreds of the leading professional and business men of Adelaide with their shirt sleeves rolled up, carrying out and stacking the stores of every description which were required for the camp'.¹¹¹ Many business firms and municipal authorities, and the state government, released their employees for service.¹¹² Public Service Commissioner Stanley Price Weir, a former 10th Battalion

¹⁰⁸ Frank Cain, *Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, 181.

¹⁰⁹ *Sappers on Service*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Leane to Chief Secretary, 10 October 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865.

¹¹¹ *Sappers on Service*, 11.

¹¹² Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928-1932', 39-40.

commander, wrote to the Under Secretary in September:

I understand that Cabinet has decided to allow officers of the Public Service to offer their services as Volunteer Workers or as Special Constables in connection with the Waterfront Strike, and that if so employed they will not suffer financially ... I am answering enquiries accordingly.¹¹³

Government records hint strongly that the unemployed too were attracted to service in the Citizens' Defence Brigade. In October 1928 the Chief Secretary received six letters from former special constables seeking work or compensation. 'I have heard from a reliable source that the Government are making an allowance to the men who volunteered in the Citizens' Defence Corps', C.W. Kendall wrote on 12 October, 'As I am not doing anything at the present moment and am considerably out of pocket, I am wondering if I am entitled to receive anything for my services'.¹¹⁴ D. Nightingale asked, 'Is there a chance of being compensation for the 10

¹¹³ Price Weir to Under Secretary, 28 September 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865.

¹¹⁴ C.W. Kendall to Chief Secretary, 12 October 1928, SRSA GRG24/6/1004.

days services wick i put in camp at Outer Harbour with the Special Constables, Sir i have been out of work for the past 8 months and has done no work at all'.¹¹⁵ Another correspondent wrote:

Being unemployed when the Hon Mr Butler premier called for special Constables on Saturday 29/9/28 I immediately volunteered for service and served until Tuesday 9/10/28 I am still on the unemployed List and I am in strating circumstances Financially those persons who were in employment and when they voluntered as Specials have being drawing their usual wages from their employers but we who were unemployed at the time that I enlistmind have been getting deeper in Debt ... I am a married man with two Children and I am in arrears 9 weeks in rent.¹¹⁶

The same correspondent indicated also that service as a special constable had unforeseen and long term consequences. 'We cannot go to the State Labour [Exchange]', he wrote, 'because we will be mobbed as they [i.e. unemployed unionists] no [sic] us and we need employment and we need money to carry on

¹¹⁵ D. Nightingale to Chief Secretary, 16 October 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/1004.

¹¹⁶ Alexander Vallance to Chief Secretary, 16 October 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/1004.

until work his [sic] forthcoming'.¹¹⁷ 'We, who were unemployed on enlisting in the Specials', another correspondent lamented, 'cannot go to the State Labour Exchange, on pain of being assaulted by the sympathisers of the strikers'.¹¹⁸

Although Leane believed that the response to the government's call demonstrated that 'the spirit of the A.I.F. was again in evidence'¹¹⁹, just how much was spirit and how much actual flesh and blood is unclear. Thirty years later a former special constable estimated that 'perhaps 60% of the special constables had served in the army in World War I'¹²⁰, but *Sappers on Service*, while noting that members of the Citizen Forces were present, does not mention returned soldiers.¹²¹ Government records indicate that some returned soldiers were among the constables. In a 28 September letter calling on Butler to introduce the Riot Act, 'Worried' noted that 'my man is a returned Soldier and good but cannot get a

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Ian McNeill to Chief Secretary, 15 October 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/1004. McNeill and Vallance were probably friends: McNeill's letter appears to have served as a model for Vallance's.

¹¹⁹ *Sappers on Service*, 5.

¹²⁰ Wait, 'Reactions to Demonstrations and Riots in Adelaide, 1928-1932', 40.

¹²¹ *Sappers on Service*, 22-23.

job as he is not a unionist'.¹²² A miscellaneous and undated report on the 'Waterside Trouble' mentions a 'volunteer wearing a Returned Soldiers Assn. badge' who was abused by wharf labourers who threatened to 'have him expelled from the R.S.A. Association'.¹²³

This last statement seems extraordinary in the light of the association of well-known South Australian RSL figures with the Citizens' Defence Brigade. The leader of the Essential Services Maintenance Volunteers, A.S. Blackburn, was South Australian RSL president between 1917 and 1920. W.C.N. Waite, commander of the Citizens Defence Brigade, was a vice-president for much of the 1920s and was a South Australian delegate to 1925 national congress.¹²⁴ But in the same way as a large number of butchers at a picnic does not necessarily indicate a butchers' picnic, the presence of prominent RSL figures in the special constabulary does not mean that they were there as RSL representatives or that the RSL was officially or semi-

¹²² 'Worried' to Butler, 28 September 1928, SRSA GRG 24/6/865.

¹²³ Miscellaneous and undated report, SRSA GRG24/6/865.

¹²⁴ State Council, 10 February 1922, 1 February 1923, 8 June 1926, 8 February 1927, 21 March 1928, State Council Minutes; Congress, 30 November 1925, 1, Central Council Minutes.

officially involved in its activities.

Blackburn for one had ceased to be active in the RSL, although he remained one of its trustees.¹²⁵

This is not to say that the presence in the Citizens' Defence Brigade of ex-AIF officers like Blackburn and Waite had no significance. Nor is it to say that the RSL and various conservative organisations did not share like views on many things. But assertions that the RSL acted as a 'recruiting ground' for right-wing organisations, or that the presence of certain RSL figures indicates that the RSL was involved as a body, must be approached with caution. As a pressure group working within the framework of established constitutional government, the RSL was dependent on the goodwill of the government, whether Labor or conservative. The RSL relied on official goodwill particularly during times of acute economic crisis, because these were the times when benefits for veterans and their dependants were most at risk.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ State Board, 6 October 1931, 1148, State Board Minutes.

¹²⁶ See Tully, 'The New Guard of New South Wales, 1931-1932', 5, and McQueen, 'The Social Character of the New Guard', 72. For the argument that the RSL and the New Guard stood for two completely different things, see Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', 123.

Throughout the 1920s, the relationship between the RSL and the labour movement was troubled. The mutual distrust engendered during the war bequeathed a potent legacy to the postwar years, and this was compounded by mutually exclusive demands for preference. But because RSL and union membership overlapped, their interests could converge. The steadily worsening unemployment of the 1920s blunted the potential for conflict. In a time of burgeoning unemployment, the RSL wanted work for returned soldiers and social stability. As its concern for the latter grew, it looked to the state to help the unemployed, regardless of whether they were returned soldiers or not. The issue of preference became irrelevant in an economic environment of no work, and both the RSL and the labour movement ranged themselves against conservative notions of charity, right and welfare. It was true that the RSL would not criticise conservative policy in the same way as it criticised Labor policy, but nevertheless the mutual interest it had with the labour movement on issues of employment and state obligation helped close some of the gap between the RSL's profession and practice of pursuing the 'middle way'. Humphrey McQueen has argued that the ideology of a

'middle way' between the extremes of 'anti-profiteering' on the one hand and 'anti-Bolshevism' on the other was constructed within the state apparatus to appeal to bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie alike.¹²⁷ While the RSL accepted this ideology and perpetuated it in its own 'middle way' rhetoric, it was not complicit in any state conspiracy. Its 'middle way' was actually right of middle, but there were areas in which it could establish satisfactory relationships with the Left. Defining its relationship with the Right, supposedly its 'natural' ally, was to prove as challenging.

¹²⁷ Humphrey McQueen, 'Shoot the Bolshevik! Hang the Profiteer! Reconstructing Australian Capitalism, 1918-21', in E.L. Wheelwright and Ken Buckley (eds.), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, v. ii, Sydney, 1978, 201.

Chapter 7

Loyalty and disloyalty

During the war conservatives had welcomed RSL assistance in prosecuting the 'win the war' campaign. A significant aspect of this was a drive against 'disloyalists', a term encompassing a wide range of political and national groups and including people of German birth or ancestry. After the war conservatives identified a new threat, Bolshevism, and turned their attention and energies towards identifying, exposing and combating 'Bolshevists'. The RSL was also anti-Bolshevist but, in common with certain ultra-loyalist groups such as the All-British League, continued to identify a German 'menace'. Many conservatives, wanting to forget the war or to concentrate on new concerns, viewed ambivalently the RSL's continuing preoccupation with the 'German question'. They were concerned about the RSL in other ways too. The RSL believed that the state owed its continued existence to the soldier and was obliged to expunge that debt, though it also believed that the balance book could never adequately be squared. Many conservatives opposed this view. Veterans who

thought the RSL's attitude ungrateful, unreasonable, greedy, or even 'Bolshevik', looked for comradeship elsewhere.

An early source of contention between the RSL and conservatives was Anzac Day. The RSL claimed Anzac Day as its own and believed that returned soldiers' views were more relevant than others' in charting Anzac Day's 'road to pre-eminence as a national event'.¹ It argued that Anzac Day should be a special day both for commemorating the dead and for reminding the government and public of their obligations to returned soldiers.² In 1917 the South Australian RSL announced that funds raised on Anzac Day would be used to construct a hall 'to welcome returned soldiers to a home of their own to avoid the necessity of many of our comrades having to patronise Public Billiard Halls etc. to wile [sic] away their leisure time'.³ A number of churches agreed that this was a worthy cause and included collections for the RSL in their Anzac services.⁴ After the war ended the RSL referred to the proposed building as a 'Memorial Hall', but continued to emphasise

¹ John Robertson, *Anzac and Empire*, Port Melbourne, Vic., 1990, 248.

² *ibid.*, 249.

³ Adjourned Committee Meeting, 17 March 1917, 132, RSA Minute Book.

⁴ *Advertiser*, 24 and 25 April 1917.

the role it would play as a social centre for returned soldiers. In April 1919 the *Advertiser* announced that proceeds from buttons sold on Anzac Day would be used towards the memorial hall's construction, which would honour fallen soldiers and house 'suitable club premises' for the RSL.⁵

The RSL believed that memorial and club functions were entirely compatible, and maintained against conservative opposition that Anzac Day itself could readily be shared between commemorating the dead and celebrating on behalf of the living. In Sydney in 1922 national congress resolved that Anzac Day should be observed 'in such a manner as to combine the memory of the Fallen with rejoicing at the birth of Australia as a nation'. The best way of accomplishing this, it believed, was by holding memorial church services in the morning and sports spectacles and fundraising in the afternoon.⁶ In 1920 South Australians marked Anzac Day with a memorial church parade and an afternoon sports carnival on Adelaide Oval.⁷ In 1921, takings from an Anzac Day

⁵ *ibid.*, 18 April 1919.

⁶ Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, S.A. Branch, Annual Report, 1920, MLSA (hereafter Annual Report 1920), n.p.

⁷ *ibid.*, n.p.

football match in Adelaide between 10th and 27th Battalion veterans were divided 60/40 in favour of the living: 40% went towards the upkeep of soldiers' graves in West Terrace Cemetery, 30% to state RSL metropolitan subsections, 20% to state RSL headquarters, and 10% to the competing teams.⁸

The RSL also believed that Anzac Day should be a statutory holiday⁹, but conservatives questioned whether this was appropriate and whether the various states could afford it. In March 1921 acting New South Wales premier James Dooley told South Australian premier Henry Barwell that the New South Wales government, after consideration at two cabinet meetings, had decided not to proclaim Anzac Day a public holiday. 'If this were done', he said, 'the Government would not have the power, under existing legislation, to prevent sports, race meetings, the opening of hotels, etc.'¹⁰ In April 1921 Barwell told an RSL deputation which had asked that Anzac Day be 'placed upon the Schedule of Holidays' that 'on the question of a Public Holiday, we are getting too many, it would mean at least an extra

⁸ *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 May 1921, 14.

⁹ Robertson, *Anzac and Empire*, 249.

¹⁰ Dooley to Barwell, 11 March 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/1172 (Premiers' Dept P70/17).

£6,000 to the Government as well as extra money to private employers, who will have to pay their men double rates for work on holiday'.¹¹ Barwell seems to have changed his mind quickly, however, for in a letter of the same day his secretary informed the RSL that the government had 'reconsidered' and had decided to declare Anzac Day a public holiday.¹² In October 1921 a premiers' conference resolved that 'irrespective of the day upon which it falls, Anzac Day be observed on the 25th April each year, and that the holiday should be a uniform one throughout the States'¹³ though, as John Robertson has noted, 'there was no stampede by the states to implement the premiers' agreement'.¹⁴

The conservative press opposed an Anzac Day public holiday. After Anzac Day 1922 the *Advertiser* raised a number of 'strictly

¹¹ Barwell to RSL Deputation, 8 April 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/1172 (Premiers' Dept P70/17).

¹² Secretary to Premier to R.G. Woodhead (sec SA RSL), 8 April 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/1172 (Premiers' Dept P70/17).

¹³ Minutes of Premiers' Conference, October 1921, SRSA GRG 24/6/1172 (Premiers' Dept P70/17). Anzac Day became a statutory holiday in South Australia in 1924; previously, it had been a 'gazetted holiday'. See *Digger*, 24 October 1924, 34, Robertson, *Anzac and Empire*, 249, and M.J. Reardon, 'Anzac Day in Adelaide, 1916: From the First Anniversary to National Public Holiday', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1979, passim.

¹⁴ Robertson, *Anzac and Empire*, 251.

utilitarian' objections to a 25 April public holiday, including 'industrial inconvenience'.¹⁵ But it declared that its strongest objection concerned the 'character' of the day. 'It will tend in time to lose its solemn and sacred character', it argued, and would 'become a holiday in the cheaper sense of the word, a day of revelry and indulgence, and not a holyday [sic]'. It argued instead that Anzac celebrations held on the nearest Sunday to 25 April would be 'more suited to the nature of the anniversary, and far more calculated to enable it to retain the character of a day of proud but sorrowful memories'.¹⁶ The *Melbourne Argus* argued similarly, fearing that 'the absence of occupation over a whole day is not conducive to reverential contemplation'.¹⁷

Other business interests also opposed an Anzac Day public holiday. In August 1922 a national conference of the Federation of Retail Grocers Associations of Australia unanimously resolved that Anzac Day should be observed on the nearest Sunday to 25 April. Delegates believed that it was 'undesirable' for government to increase the number of existing holidays, and that a weekday holiday

¹⁵ *Advertiser*, 26 April 1922.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in *Register*, 28 April 1922.

would tend to introduce sporting activities 'repugnant to the feelings of citizens on that occasion'.¹⁸ The Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers and the South Australian Chambers of Manufacturers and Commerce argued similarly¹⁹, much to the disgust of *Diggers' Gazette*, which accused them of being 'out for business as well as the observance of patriotism'.²⁰

There were other areas in which the RSL clashed with conservatives. Conservative values stressed thrift, self-reliance, private benevolence and, perhaps most significantly here, minimal intervention by the state. The changes wrought by the war made some cherished conservative ideals unworkable. Private organisations, for example, could not adequately compensate returned soldiers for injuries sustained during the war, resettle soldiers, or support the dependants of those killed. The RSL also believed that such things were owed its members as a right, not as charity, and that the state was the proper authority to expunge the debt.²¹

¹⁸ J.N. Williams (sec Federation of Retail Grocers Association of Australia) to Barwell, 22 August 1922, SRSA GRG 24/6/1172 (Premiers' Dept P70/17).

¹⁹ *Advertiser*, 18 September 1922.

²⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 June 1922, 32.

²¹ See Chapter 2, *passim*.

By the end of the war, there were two basic strands of conservative thought and organisation: one which took into account the changes of the war, and one which did not. The differences can be seen in the attitudes of the South Australian government on the one hand, and the South Australian Soldiers' Fund (SASF) on the other, towards the erection of a state war memorial. In January 1919 the SASF decided that proceeds from its future collections would be transferred to the Australia Day Committee 'for a National Memorial'.²² It formed a national memorial sub-committee which recommended in February that a war memorial be erected 'on a prominent site in the City'. It also recommended the adoption of an educational scheme for 'the immediate descendants of Sailors, Soldiers, and Nurses who have died during their term of service'.²³ Later that month the South Australian Repatriation Department granted the SASF the right to use Australia Day to appeal for funds for the proposed memorial.²⁴

²² Executive Committee, 23 January 1919, 179, SASF Minutes.

²³ Meeting of Administrators, 29 January 1919, 180, National Memorial Sub-Committee, 6 February 1919, 191, SASF Minutes.

²⁴ Executive Committee, 10 February 1919, 193, SASF Minutes.

The national memorial sub-committee planned to ask Archibald Peake whether his Liberal-Nationalist Coalition state government would subsidise its Australia Day appeal²⁵, but before it could do so Peake announced publicly on 6 March that the government would accept total responsibility for the memorial. 'It must be a national memorial', he explained, 'and not representative of any sectional interests whatever'. He continued:

It must fittingly embody the national sentiment. Much as any private contributions to this end may be valued, I think the project is one that should have the endorsement of Parliament, if it does not find its origin here. The Government should take the lead in a matter of this kind, and Parliament should be asked to carry a resolution committing the State to the necessary expenditure for the memorial.²⁶

In determining that sole responsibility for erecting a 'national' war memorial would rest with the state, Peake embraced a concept of state which owed more to the changes wrought

²⁵ National War Memorial Sub-Committee, 7 March 1919, 223.

²⁶ Unidentified press cutting, 6 March 1919, in National War Memorial Sub-Committee, 7 March 1919, 223, SASF Minutes.

by the war than to 'traditional' conservative thought. The SASF had little choice but to accept Peake's decision and, after much discussion, decided in early May to abandon the proposed Australia Day National Memorial Appeal.²⁷

Charitable societies and patriotic organisations were not, however, always anachronisms in a time when, as Brian Dickey has noted, 'community response to the problems of returned soldiers and their dependants was in universalist terms - the federal government rather than charitable societies were expected to act'.²⁸ The demands on a reluctant state government by an organisation known as the Soldiers' Welfare Combined Recommendation Committee provides an example of how war had altered some conservatives' ideas of what was acceptable state assistance and what was not. At the end of the war, a number of patriotic organisations, apparently eager to extend into peacetime the niche they had found in

²⁷ National Memorial Sub-Committee, 1 May 1919, 277, SASF Minutes. This marked the end of all appeals by the SASF, which then moved to place on record its 'appreciation of the splendid response made by the public of South Australia to their Appeals for the benefit of the Soldier, and his dependents' (Administrators' Meeting, 9 May 1919, 285, SASF Minutes).

²⁸ Dickey, *No Charity There*, 143.

war²⁹, and with funds to be disbursed, joined forces to form an Associations Combined Recommendation Committee. Among groups represented were the League of Loyal Women, the Ladies' Battalion Clubs, the Rejected Volunteers' Association, the Cheer-Up Society, and the Wattle Day League.³⁰ The Committee was to discuss matters of 'common concern' to its members, without interfering 'with the executive control of the various associations affiliated with it'.³¹

Not long after the formation of the Associations Combined Recommendations Committee, South Australian governor Henry Galway, acting on advice from Lady Munro Ferguson, wife of the governor-general, suggested that it change its name to the Soldiers' Welfare Combined Recommendation Committee, which it did.³² Soon after, it initiated a movement for improving the neglected graves of soldiers buried in the West Terrace cemetery, a project which received the full support of the RSL, which

²⁹ See, for example, the constitution of the Australian Imperial Association which aimed, among other things, 'to retain and utilise for national benefit the services of loyal and patriotic workers' (*Returned Soldier*, 7 February 1919, 36).

³⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 March 1920, 27.

³¹ *ibid.*, 27.

³² *ibid.*

itself joined the Committee.³³ The state government was asked to set aside part of West Terrace cemetery especially for soldiers, and a half-acre section of the so-called Light Oval was subsequently allotted on the condition that it be used for 'the internment free of cost of all soldiers whose estate or relatives are unable to pay' and that it would be 'the right of soldiers' relatives able to pay to have soldiers interred there on payment of the usual fees'.³⁴ A small committee known as the AIF Cemetery Trust was then formed and charged with the responsibility for raising money for 'the erection of a suitable general monument' and establishing a fund from which the interest generated would be used 'to provide for the permanent upkeep of the Soldiers' half-acre'.³⁵

From the outset, the South Australian RSL thought that government support for the project should extend beyond providing the West Terrace cemetery half-acre. It was willing to contribute its own money towards the project, but felt also that government funding was both essential and obligatory. At

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *The Garden of Memory, A.I.F. Cemetery Trust, Adelaide, c. 1949, n.p.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

an early meeting of the AIF Cemetery Trust's executive committee, Colonel C.P. Butler reported that delegates at a recent conference of the RSL's country branches were 'amazed' at hearing of the condition of soldiers' graves in the West Terrace cemetery, and agreed that the RSL branches should provide 'sufficient assistance' to help improve the graves. They also considered that it was 'absolutely the duty of the Government to assist financially in this matter'.³⁶

The RSL's calls for government help in providing graves for deceased veterans is not surprising, for it had always had strong views about what the state owed its members. What is surprising is that groups such as the Soldiers' Welfare Combined Recommendation Committee and the AIF Cemetery Trust, which represented various conservative groups whose views towards state assistance in general and towards veterans in particular could often differ widely from the RSL's, argued the same thing. Henry Galway, for example, had deplored during the war the tendency of the 'majority' of returned men to 'demand all

³⁶ Executive Committee, 11 February 1921, n.p., in Minutes of the AIF Cemetery Trust, RSL State Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter AIF Cemetery Trust Minutes).

that is done for them as a right'.³⁷ However, when in February 1921 it seemed unlikely that sufficient money would be raised through private means to establish the AIF cemetery, members of the AIF Cemetery Trust did not hesitate to approach acting chief secretary George Ritchie to ask that all, not part, of Light Oval be granted, and that the government 'provide all or part of the £5000 required to put the cemetery on a sound footing'.³⁸ The government was reluctant to make such a commitment but, after what was described as a 'stormy conference', agreed to contribute £1 for every £1 subscribed by the public up to a maximum of £2500.³⁹

There were limits to what conservatives saw as legitimate and appropriate government assistance. While most agreed with the RSL that certain types of assistance, such as obtaining land for soldiers' cemeteries and providing for its upkeep, could properly be a duty and function of government, they condemned RSL attempts to extend this to other areas. This is illustrated by the attitude of the Legacy Club. Legacy was established in Melbourne in 1923 by Major-

³⁷ Peter Howell, 'More Varieties of Vice-Regal Life', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, n. 9, 1981, 8.

³⁸ *The Garden of Memory*, n.p.

³⁹ *ibid.*

General Sir John Gellibrand as a 'luncheon club for returned servicemen in business' to encourage 'business reciprocity'.⁴⁰ Legacy hoped that employer ex-soldiers would take the initiative and become leaders of the business world, and believed that if ex-soldier employers (that is, its members) hired ex-soldier employees, both employee and business would benefit.⁴¹ It also believed that ex-soldiers could be rehabilitated through employment, especially since veterans had, through their war experience, supposedly gained insight and initiative beyond that of civilians. Legacy members were encouraged to belong to their local RSL club⁴², and there was a degree of overlap between the two organisations. For example, in 1928 former South Australian RSL president A.S. Blackburn became Adelaide Legacy's second president, succeeding police commissioner brigadier-general Raymond Leane.⁴³

The relationship between Legacy and the RSL was frequently strained. Like the RSL, Legacy claimed to support the principle of preference in employment for returned soldiers but, unlike the RSL, it believed

⁴⁰ Lyons, *Legacy*, 8.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 10.

⁴² *ibid.*, 12, 34.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 28.

that government assistance beyond preference increased the dependence of ex-soldiers, and that government interference between employer and employee should be minimised.⁴⁴ This attitude reflected the social composition of Legacy. It was led by senior ex-AIF officers. This, Sol Encel has argued, was something 'exceptional among ex-servicemen's organisations'.⁴⁵ In contrast, the RSL leadership was 'drawn almost entirely from junior officers and NCOs'.⁴⁶

The link between seniority in the AIF and business or class background is beyond the scope of this study⁴⁷, but Gellibrand's original vision of Legacy to encourage 'business reciprocity' must be remembered. Senior ex-AIF officers who were not employers hesitated to join.⁴⁸ As employers, too, Legacy members experienced difficult economic times differently from their employees. During the Great Depression, for example, while some individual legatees 'were financially squeezed and ... thrown upon hard

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ Sol Encel, *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia*, Melbourne, 1972, 477.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ It is covered to some extent in L.L. Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First AIF, 1914-18: Some Statistical Evidence', *passim*.

⁴⁸ Lyons, *Legacy*, 8.

times', on the whole 'legatees and those who supported Legacy belonged to that section of society least affected'.⁴⁹

Legacy's business orientation had a profound affect on its attitudes towards certain veterans' issues. 'As befitted their class', Mark Lyons has written, 'they were unhappy about the extensive government assistance which continued to be given to returned soldiers in no way physically impaired [and] they were unhappy with those returned soldiers who continually asked for more'.⁵⁰ Legacy regarded the RSL with a great deal of suspicion, and labelled as 'irresponsible' the RSL's demands for veterans rights over and above what Legacy itself deemed proper.⁵¹

The same attitude was taken by Captain L. Bolitho, M.C., manager of the State Savings Bank of Victoria, who in April 1929 resigned from the RSL on the grounds that 'the Executive does not exercise any control over the actions of a branch which demands preference for totally unworthy men'. 'If I could be assured that the League would not tolerate the extravagant claims of the

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 12.

wastrel', he wrote to the federal executive, 'I would gladly rejoin', and continued:

At present, as a result of actual experience, I feel that the League is detrimental to the interests of genuine and fairminded returned soldiers ... Those who are 'below par' as a result of their service deserve preference and support, but I am firmly of the opinion that a fit returned soldier should be a better and more reliable citizen as a result of his training and experience; not that he should be encouraged into becoming a parasite on the community.⁵²

Legacy's views and Bolitho's indicate that not all veterans were happy with the RSL's interpretation of what constituted society's dues to its ex-servicemen. There was particular suspicion about war disabilities. In 1929 A.N. 'Kem' Kemsley, vice-president of Melbourne Legacy from 1928 to 1930 and president from 1932 to 1933, criticised the federal government 'for placing the onus of proof (or disproof) on the Repatriation Commission in cases where returned men claimed that illness or injury

⁵² Bolitho to E.J. Dibdin (sec RSL), 18 April 1929, NLA MS6609/1/4543B.

were war caused'.⁵³ It is doubtful whether Kemsley would have approved of a 1927 South Australian RSL resolution which insisted that 'where men were employed in Government Departments at the time of enlistment and resumed duty there at the cessation of their War Services ... they be re-trained in employment, unless a charge of inefficiency, not brought about by War Disability, is laid and sustained to warrant their dismissal'.⁵⁴

There were other differences between the RSL and conservative organisations. Both the RSL and conservatives opposed 'Bolshevism', but could mean different things by it. Some conservatives saw Bolshevism in any deviation from traditional values. For Legacy, for example, this could apply to 'excessive' demands on the state. Consequently, it could identify a 'Bolshie' element within the RSL which 'continually asked for more' from the government.⁵⁵ In June 1921 RSL federal secretary F.E. Forrest said that 'many people considered that they [the RSL] were arch-Bolsheviks, who were out to collar Australia

⁵³ Lyons, *Legacy*, 22. Kemsley was a friend of J.C. McPhee, deputy commissioner for repatriation in Victoria. Both visited Adelaide in February 1928 and played an influential role in the establishment of its Legacy Club (Lyons, *Legacy*, 25).

⁵⁴ State Council, 6 December 1927, 378, State Council Minutes.

⁵⁵ Lyons, *Legacy*, 10.

for themselves'. 'This was not correct', he continued. 'The League aimed at getting a fair, square deal for the digger'.⁵⁶

The RSL defined Bolshevism as the threat to 'constitutional government' from 'rank anarchy', and Bolsheviks as those who attempted 'to attain their demands through other than constitutional means'.⁵⁷ It believed that a likely way for this to happen was through the trade union movement which, as South Australian RSL president W.D. Price said in January 1921, consisted on the whole of 'loyal workmen' who were, unfortunately, prone to 'insidious teachings ... propagated by revolutionaries' who had 'succeeded in worming themselves' into the movement.⁵⁸ Few conservatives would have disputed this definition or the supposed threat from the trade union movement. But the RSL's idea of Bolshevism encompassed more than this. When the RSL spoke of Bolshevism, it spoke of disloyalty; when it spoke of disloyalty, it inevitably included those wartime stereotypes 'enemy aliens', 'Germans', 'slackers' and 'eligibles'. When the RSL came to warn of the dangers of Bolshevism, it did so by creating a synthesis of wartime and postwar threats.

⁵⁶ *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 June 1921, 26.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 7 August 1921, 4.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 21 January 1921, 5.

Of the wartime threats which the RSL identified as posing a continuing menace, the RSL believed the 'German element' was one of the most serious. It waged a campaign against so-called Germans in three main areas: Australians of German background who it believed had in some way demonstrated 'disloyalty' during the war; people who had been interned during the war as enemy aliens; and 'German' religion and culture in general. In his January 1920 presidential report, A.S. Blackburn defined the three main goals of the South Australian RSL as obtaining 'real' preference to returned soldiers, maintaining and extending repatriation benefits, and securing the deportation of 'aliens who are disloyal'.⁵⁹ The RSL also lobbied untiringly for the government to keep German schools closed, and to prevent the German language being taught in South Australian schools or spoken in public buildings or churches.⁶⁰ It

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 1 February 1920, 6. State Council subsequently instructed South Australian national congress delegates to 'urge that all Internees should be deported' (State Council, 16 April 1920, 54, State Council Minutes).

⁶⁰ See, for example, R. G. Woodhead (a/sec SA RSL) to A.P.K. Morris (a/gen sec RSL), 10 November 1919, NLA MS6609/1/922, Woodhead to Barwell, 21 September 1920, SRSA GRG 24/6/1850, and Barwell's response in *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 October 1920, 35. *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 June 1921, 13, reported a South Australian state board member as having said that he 'would fight German schools to the death'. For an alternate view, see *Returned*

also demanded that the federal government reject naturalisation applications from 'enemy alien subjects'.⁶¹

Soldier settlement and the need for good land conveniently fuelled this anti-German feeling. At national congress in 1919, Blackburn moved that the RSL urge federal and state governments to 'compulsorily acquire all land belonging to Germans or other enemy disloyalists and set same aside for returned sailors and soldiers'.⁶² At the same congress, South Australian A. H. Teece told delegates that district councils such as those in Eudunda and Loxton were dominated by Germans who influenced local repatriation boards, resulting in returned soldiers 'being asked to take up blocks of virgin mallee scrub while men of that type [i.e. Germans] occupied some of the best land in the State'.⁶³ Blackburn suggested that the loyalty of 'German landowners' be tested by 'ascertaining the number of their sons and the number who went to the war'⁶⁴, and at a

Soldier, 12 March 1920, 7, in which a correspondent opposed persecuting German-Australians because 'at least they are white'.

⁶¹ Woodhead to Morris, 10 November 1919, NLA MS6609/1/922.

⁶² Congress, 18 July 1919, n.p., Central Council Minutes.

⁶³ *Daily Herald*, 19 July 1919.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

public meeting late in 1919 he called again on the government to acquire land belonging to 'enemy aliens', including internees and 'Germans' who did not enlist, for settling returned soldiers.⁶⁵ The RSL also questioned the right of 'enemy aliens' to operate businesses. In June 1919 the federal executive demanded that the government appoint a board, composed of returned soldiers nominated by the RSL and headed by a Supreme Court judge, to inquire into 'enemy aliens in business' with a view to deporting them.⁶⁶

When in the postwar years the RSL came to warn of the dangers of Bolshevism, it was not able to separate this threat from those it believed still existed from the war. When South Australian RSL president W.D. Price sought in 1921 to explain what made a fellow Australian a Bolshevist, he attached the Bolshevist stereotype to that of the wartime 'slacker'. 'Has it ever occurred to you to think how most of the Reds adopted their new religion?', he asked RSL members, and continued:

⁶⁵ Shaefer, 'The Treatment of Germans in South Australia 1914-1924', 59.

⁶⁶ Central Council, 4 June 1919, 17-19, Central Council Minutes.

From my own observations I have noticed that they are usually young men of a very eligible war-time age, who, not desiring to enlist, had perforce to look for a doctrine to cover their inaction. They found the soap box orator, or some such importation propounding a wonderful theory of the equality of man and the conscription of labour, and so accepted the faith, not because he believed, but because it suited.⁶⁷

Returned Soldier warned just as explicitly of a connection between Germans, Bolsheviks, disloyalists and slackers. It advocated deporting all internees regardless of whether any evidence existed of disloyalty, fearing that released internees would ally themselves with Bolsheviks. 'The whole lot of suspected Fritzes should be sent back to Germany', it said:

If they were considered too dangerous to be allowed at large when the war was on, then they are equally dangerous now that the guns have ceased firing. Instead of being deported many of the Squareheads are being allowed liberty to go whither they listeth [sic], and the result is

⁶⁷ Sun, 30 July 1921.

that they are joining forces with the Bolsheviks.⁶⁸

The RSL's postwar concern with Germans, eligibles and slackers was not shared by governments. When in 1919 South Australian premier Archibald Peake received an RSL resolution calling for the abolition of 'German Schools, Churches and Clubs throughout the Commonwealth', he wrote to his interstate counterparts asking what they intended to do. The Victorian government replied that it had not yet decided upon anything, the New South Wales government first that it was still considering the matter and later that it intended to defer the question of aliens until the next premiers' conference, and the governments of Western Australia, Tasmania and Queensland that they had no such institutions in their states.⁶⁹ Peake also received a resolution from the Queensland RSL's executive committee asking if his government was 'prepared to adhere to the principles of giving preference to Returned Soldiers who are eligible and possess the necessary qualifications, even to the extent of replacing those men who were

⁶⁸ *Returned Soldier*, 30 May 1919, 4.

⁶⁹ Premiers, Vic., NSW, W.A., Tas., Qu. to Peake, SRSA GRG 24/6/1025.

eligible for active service and did not volunteer'. Peake replied that 'as conscription was rejected by the people at the referendum, the Government does not feel justified in resorting to economic conscription now that the war is over'. Not surprisingly, the RSL was unhappy with the response and accused Peake of using conscription as an excuse 'seized upon as a means of relieving the Government of its promises of preference to soldiers'.⁷⁰

Not all conservatives dismissed the RSL's continued concern with its wartime nemeses. In South Australia the anti-German vehemence of C.E. Owen Smyth and the All-British League matched that of the RSL. *Returned Soldier* described Owen Smyth approvingly as 'a man with an intimate knowledge of the treachery of the German'.⁷¹ When certain members of the public accused the officer commanding the Torrens Island internment camp of flogging, bayoneting and shooting wartime internees 'just as the humour took [him]'⁷², *Returned Soldier* reported Owen Smyth as replying, 'That the truculent and grossly insolent Germans were only kept from a serious emeute by Captain

⁷⁰ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 November 1919, 73.

⁷¹ *Returned Soldier*, 28 November 1919, 14.

⁷² *ibid.*, 23 May 1919, 6.

Hawkes' disciplinary treatment of them is only too well known to scores of respectable citizens of Port Adelaide, including the Mayor of the day and the principal merchants and officials of the seaport town'.⁷³ In November 1919 a South Australian MP asked that Owen Smyth's retirement as Superintendent of Public Buildings be 'expedited', and *Returned Soldier* assumed that this was because he had become an embarrassment to the government for his strident anti-Germanism. It then attacked politicians who did not have 'the courage to tackle the German question as it should be tackled', pointing to the existence of a German voting block that spelled doom to any candidate 'who stood up in a German electorate and expressed himself in favour of ousting the disloyalists'.⁷⁴

It is unclear whether a 'German' voting block did exist or whether the government, like the majority of the population, wanted simply to leave behind the hatred of the war and get on with peacetime pursuits. But there were some areas in which the sensibilities of returned soldiers had to be taken into consideration. When in June 1919 the Woodside

⁷³ *ibid.*, 30 May 1919, 3.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 28 November 1919, 14.

Repatriation Board proposed replacing retiring member A.H. Moore with Heinrich Frederick August Thiele, the state repatriation board refused to sanction the change until a local committee organiser had visited the district 'to see if it was possible for an English name to be submitted in lieu of Mr. Thiele'.⁷⁵ Later inquiries established that Mr Thiele was 'a loyal man', but the state repatriation board still felt that members 'would prefer nomination of a Britisher' and the case was deferred.⁷⁶

In its attitude to Germans the RSL probably lagged behind public opinion by some years, and no doubt some members never lost their hatred. There were exceptions. At a June 1919 federal executive meeting New South Wales representative A.P.K. Morris defended the plight of internees, arguing that many were 'working men, who had no influence politically, industrially, or otherwise and they were merely interned in order to satisfy public opinion on the matter'.⁷⁷ In 1922 delegates to the South Australian sub-branch conference listened to a member tell them

⁷⁵ Repatriation State Board, 29 May 1919, Minutes of the Repatriation State Board, Australian Archives, Adelaide, AP286/4.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 12 June 1919.

⁷⁷ Central Council, 4 June 1919, 6, Central Council Minutes.

that 'it was petty in the extreme to raise the principle that the German language should not be spoken'. He continued:

Australia was at a stage when religious bitterness of that kind would bring about a dissolution of the [Returned Soldiers'] Association. The war was over, and it was time that all parties combined together.⁷⁸

As the war receded, the RSL did try to define more exactly what it meant by 'disloyalist', and consequently began to place less emphasis on 'Germans'. 'All men who were disloyal should be treated alike, whether their original nationality was enemy, neutral or allied in the war', *Diggers' Gazette* argued in March 1920, 'and, of course, traitors of British origin, if there are any, are the worst traitors of all'.⁷⁹ Commenting on the RSL's policy that government 'compulsorily acquire' the land of 'traitors', it asked:

Would it not be better to say straight out that if a man has been disloyal his land should be confiscated, and he should be expelled from Australia? ... The main

⁷⁸ *Digger*, 22 September 1922, 42.

⁷⁹ *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 March 1920, 5.

difficulty ... is to decide who has been disloyal ... internment was no evidence of disloyalty ... Why not have a special tribunal appointed at once to decide which of these men are loyal and which are not? ... This is not a mere matter of Germans, and any tendency to indiscriminate prejudice against all men with German names - many of whom are loyal members of our League - is most mischievous.⁸⁰

When at national congress in 1920 a delegate moved that the RSL 'emphatically' protest against 'the laxity of the Federal authorities in permitting notorious Germans ... to remain in the Commonwealth', another delegate suggested that the motion apply only to 'Germans' of 'known' disloyalty. The first man to enlist in South Australia was of German parentage on both sides, he explained, 'and another German family had sent four sons to the war, one of whom was killed'. Although many shared his sentiments, a majority still favoured the original motion.⁸¹

By the early 1930s tolerant voices were more numerous, and the RSL had moderated much of its anti-Germanism. In 1929 South Australian RSL president W.F.J. McCann represented the RSL at the annual British

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ *Returned Soldier*, 16 April 1920, 5.

Empire Service Legion conference in London, and returned to tell state sub-branch conference delegates that 'we are ... going to try and collaborate with the German Ex-Service men as regards world peace'.⁸² In 1931 the South Australian RSL state board recorded its appreciation of the state Lutheran Synod's advice that, although religious services prevented worshippers from participating in services on Anzac Day, which fell on a Sunday, it affirmed its 'loyalty to Empire'.⁸³ In fact, the state board and state council often blocked or modified some of the more extreme motions which continued to come in from some of the country sub-branches. In 1932 state board, acting on a sub-branch motion, requested and accepted a radio 5CL explanation that it had broadcast Lutheran church services on Anzac Day as an attempt to 'break down the antipathy to Germans in this state', though to mollify sub-branch opinion it had to ask that 5CL in future give 'first consideration' to broadcasting the official

⁸² Sub-branch conference, 19 September 1929, 357, Minutes of the South Australian Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia Sub-Branch Conference, 18-19 September 1929, State RSL Headquarters, Adelaide (hereafter 1929 Sub-Branch Conference).

⁸³ State Board, 12 May 1931, 1080, State Board Minutes.

Anzac Sunday service.⁸⁴ And in 1933 the Port Lincoln state council delegate withdrew his sub-branch's motion opposing restoration of German place names when a number of delegates argued that 'we have a lot of German diggers who are real good fellows' and that 'most of these places were named after honoured Australians of German origin'.⁸⁵

In summary, the RSL's slowness to abandon its hatred of all things German was one of many things which distinguished it from conservatives. The RSL was concerned that 'disloyalists' threatened Australia, and believed that such disloyalists included 'Germans' as well as 'Bolsheviks'. This tendency to define and make sense of the present by recourse to the experiences and values of the war years was typical of the RSL. It was war service which defined who could join the RSL and who could not, it was members' war service which the RSL believed gave it the right to demand compensation from the state in ways and areas without precedent, and the justification to continue fighting the German 'enemy' into peacetime. But other Australians were affected by the

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 3 May 1932, 1235.

⁸⁵ State Council, 15 March 1933, 558, State Council Minutes. See also State Board, 17 May 1932, 1244, 21 March 1933, 1387, and 4 April 1933, 1394, State Board Minutes.

war experience too, even if they did not do the actual fighting. Conservative organisations such as the South Australian Soldiers' Fund resisted the changes that war had brought, and clung to a model of conservatism which abhorred state intervention of any kind. Other conservatives accepted that war and its aftermath had created new social obligations which demanded new methods of dealing with them. While conservatives may have differed from the RSL, and between themselves, over the degree to which the state was obliged to care for veterans or to ensure that their sacrifice was appropriately commemorated, few denied that the obligation existed. The RSL's success in achieving official recognition, and gaining and maintaining government concessions, was possible because the war that spawned the League also changed Australian society in ways unthinkable in 1914.

Chapter 8

Looking ahead, 1932 - 1939: a survey

By the early 1930s the RSL was a truly national organisation, with much of the internal dissension which marked the 1920s resolved and federal president Gilbert Dyett secure in his position. During the 1930s the League became increasingly preoccupied with defence issues, particularly after Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in March 1933. The RSL continued to support the League of Nations and world peace movements but increasingly looked to other ways to protect Australia, notably by lobbying for increased defence expenditure and the reintroduction of compulsory military training. The RSL also lobbied to protect the welfare entitlements of returned soldiers for which had it battled so hard during the 1920s. In the years immediately after the war, the RSL had espoused a vision of Australia that embraced all its citizens, a vision of a society that returned soldiers could shape to become more equitable, unified and prosperous than it had ever been before. By the 1930s the RSL had turned in on itself, eschewing this vision and instead concentrating solely on the welfare of its

own members and seeking, like W.M. Hughes at Versailles, to keep Australia safe.¹

RSL membership grew spectacularly during the 1930s, more than doubling in seven years. Although national RSL membership generally decreased between 1920 and 1925 and increased between 1926 and 1939, these trends mask differences between the fortunes of the state branches. (Figure 2). National RSL membership dropped significantly between 1920 and 1921 (10%), but the first major plummet occurred between 1921 and 1922, when membership fell from 44,643 to 29,864 (33%). Thus the RSL experienced a decline in membership of 43% in two years. State branch losses were uneven, with Victoria losing nearly half its membership, New South Wales and Western Australia more than a third, Queensland a quarter, and South Australia and Tasmania a little over one sixth. Between 1922 and 1923 national membership fell 18% from 29,864 to 24,482, with Tasmania and New South Wales losing the largest proportions of members (over 40% each) and Queensland and Victoria actually gaining a few (4% each). While national membership remained relatively

¹ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 189.

**FIGURE 2: STATE AND NATIONAL RSL MEMBERSHIP FIGURES, 1920 - 1939
(EXCLUDES PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA, FCT (ACT) AND DARWIN BRANCHES)**

	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	National
1920	6,967 (-17%)	8,241 (+34%)	20,630 (-41%)	7,091 (+1%)	4,721 (+23%)	2,071 (+20%)	49,721 (-10%)
1921	5,752 (-27%)	11,065 (-35%)	12,236 (-46%)	7,130 (-18%)	5,800 (-37%)	2,491 (-16%)	44,643 (-33%)
1922	4,211 (+4%)	7,207 (-41%)	6,627 (+4%)	5,880 (-15%)	3,668 (-28%)	2,094 (-42%)	29,864 (-18%)
1923	4,374 (-16%)	4,261 (+27%)	6,870 (-16%)	4,980 (+10%)	2,631 (+43%)	1,217 (+24%)	24,482 (+5%)
1924	3,689 (-20%)	5,431 (-34%)	5,780 (+7%)	5,500 (+19%)	3,762 (+11%)	1,508 (-32%)	25,670 (-4%)
1925	2,960 (+12%)	3,604 (+0%)	6,173 (+7%)	6,557 (-13%)	4,169 (+6%)	1,020 (+0%)	24,631 (+23%)
1926	3,293 (+14%)	3,607 (+19%)	6,581 (+21%)	5,673 (+28%)	4,413 (+12%)	1,053 (+13%)	30,346 (-1%)
1927	3,736 (+9%)	4,304 (+42%)	7,971 (+4%)	7,275 (+0%)	4,922 (+12%)	1,194 (+12%)	29,925 (+14%)

	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	National
1928	4, 046 (+18%)	7, 394 (+43%)	8, 253 (+29%)	7, 279 (-10%)	5, 490 (+28%)	1, 337 (+2%)	34, 233 (+21%)
1929	4, 754 (+2%)	10, 540 (-1%)	10, 615 (+14%)	6, 585 (-4%)	7, 025 (-6%)	1, 370 (+14%)	41, 417 (+2%)
1930	4, 848 (+6%)	10, 472 (+2%)	12, 119 (+1%)	6, 301 (-21%)	6, 585 (-23%)	1, 556 (-2%)	42, 276 (-5%)
1931	5, 118 (-8%)	10, 728 (+13%)	12, 294 (+6%)	4, 975 (+11%)	5, 064 (+28%)	1, 532 (-4%)	40, 067 (+9%)
1932	4, 697 (+19%)	12, 105 (+25%)	13, 023 (+17%)	5, 528 (+7%)	6, 460 (-2%)	1, 473 (+10%)	43, 629 (+15%)
1933	5, 603 (+15%)	15, 165 (+25%)	15, 250 (+7%)	5, 900 (+22%)	6, 320 (-6%)	1, 623 (+32%)	50, 067 (+14%)
1934	6, 431 (+18%)	18, 990 (+28%)	16, 270 (+24%)	7, 181 (+19%)	5, 962 (+15%)	2, 137 (+45%)	57, 282 (+24%)
1935	7, 617 (+15%)	24, 267 (+3%)	20, 131 (+6%)	8, 536 (+20%)	6, 880 (+18%)	3, 091 (+5%)	70, 850 (+9%)
1936	8, 755 (+10%)	24, 882 (-1%)	21, 403 (+0%)	10, 225 (+6%)	8, 097 (+0%)	3, 241 (+9%)	76, 909 (+2%)

	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	National
1937	9, 646 (+6%)	24, 730 (+10%)	21, 370 (+1%)	10, 848 (+2%)	8, 091 (-1%)	3, 517 (+6%)	78, 518 (+5%)
1938	10, 267 (+2%)	27, 112 (-3%)	21, 615 (+1%)	11, 078 (+2%)	8, 008 (+1%)	3, 713 (-3%)	82, 147 (+0%)
1939	10, 475	26, 325	21, 933	11, 259	8, 085	3, 594	82, 080

1. Figures in brackets indicate membership gain or loss between years.

2. Membership gain or loss below 1% is recorded as +-0%.

Source: Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 234-235.

stable in 1923, 1924 and 1925, state membership fluctuated. New South Wales and Tasmanian membership grew by about a quarter between 1923 and 1924 but then fell by close to a third the following year. Western Australian membership expanded by nearly 50% between 1923 and 1924 and continued to rise over the next five years. South Australian membership grew between 1924 and 1925 but declined between 1925 and 1926, the only state to register a decline of membership in a period when national membership grew 23% from 24,631 to 30,346.

The pattern of membership growth between 1931 and 1939 is quite different. National membership grew 105% from 40,067 in 1931 to 82,080 in 1939. State branches recorded different levels of growth over this period (Queensland 105%, New South Wales 145%, Victoria 78%, South Australia 126%, Western Australia 60%, and Tasmania 135%), but no state branch experienced the wild swings away from the main trends that characterised the period 1920 to 1930, and even the branch recording the least growth added to its membership by more than half as much again over an eight-year period.

Differences between membership fluctuations of state branches between 1920

and 1929 suggest that events in the states and the character of the branches had a bearing on their attractiveness to returned soldiers.² Conversely, the consistencies of the rates of growth between state branches and each other and between individual state branches and the national organisation between 1929 and 1939 suggest either that state branches overcame their internal administrative, financial or political problems by the end of the 1920s or that the RSL developed more of a national identity which influenced members to remain with or rejoin the League even when they may have been less than happy with their own state branches.

It is also significant that, although the fortunes of the state branches continued to vary up to 1929, national membership began to grow steadily from 1925. In other words,

² Kristianson has argued that the drop in membership between 1921 and 1924 may have been more apparent than real, with many sub-branches (particularly in Victoria) refusing to remit the required portion of membership subscriptions paid to them to the state branch office. He bases this partly on the observation that the decrease in RSL membership was not matched by an increase in the size of any other organisation, but at the same time acknowledges that it was possible that 'men who had joined the League upon disembarkation from overseas failed to renew their membership as personal responsibilities laid greater claim to their time and money'. *The Politics of Patriotism*, 37.

at no time after 1925 (with the exception of slight hiccoughs in 1926-27 and 1930-31) were overall state gains in membership less than overall losses, and usually they were considerably greater. If the success of the RSL as a national body may be measured by its growing membership, this is something which started as early as 1925-26. The Depression slowed and then reversed this growth, but after 1931 there was again a 'substantial upward swing in membership'.³

Kristianson has seen this leap in membership as among the factors which made 1931-1932 a turning point for the RSL, and has argued that other factors were increased use by Dyett of the indirect lobbying tactics favoured by some state branches, and 'increased participation by the branches in the government of the League at the federal level'.⁴ He has also observed that, from 1931, the RSL became increasingly concerned with matters affecting Australian security.⁵ Although it had lobbied for increased defence expenditure during the 1920s, the League had judged security to be better obtained through immigration, the White Australia policy and world disarmament than through greater

³ *ibid.*, 67.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

defence spending.⁶ Kristianson has partly attributed this increased attention to defence to the virtual halt in immigration which occurred as the result of the Depression, but he has also pointed to external factors such as Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in March 1933.⁷

We have seen that the RSL was more concerned with defence issues during the 1920s than Kristianson's comments suggest. What the post-1931 environment brought to the RSL was not a greater interest in defence - in which it has always been interested - but a greater attention. Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations was a powerful catalyst for this. Immediately after this, the RSL federal executive resolved to urge the federal government to 'take the necessary steps to provide for an adequate Defence Force'⁸, and sent a circular letter containing the resolution to all federal parliamentarians.⁹ Kristianson has noted that the response from parliamentarians was 'far

⁶ *ibid.*, 67 - 68.

⁷ *ibid.*, 68.

⁸ Annual Report, 1933, 4-5, NLA MS6609/1, 7408B.

⁹ General secretary to federal parliamentarians, 7 April 1933 (RSL file 7072B), cited in Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

from encouraging'.¹⁰ Senator Arthur Rae replied that 'the military axiom that "to pursue peace you must be prepared for war" is not borne out in practice and is probably the most pernicious falsehood that has led to more human slaughter than any other sentiment ever uttered'¹¹, sentiments which reflected both a lifetime devoted to radical Labor and union politics and the personal tragedy of two sons killed during the war.¹² Dr William Maloney, fifty-one years a Labor parliamentarian, a staunch anti-militarist but ardent voluntarist, and advocate for children, the aged, the unemployed and returned soldiers¹³, wrote:

I wish your Federal Executive would remember the words of that poor Digger, who before committing suicide for want of food and work, left a letter in which he expressed his wish that the people of Australia would make their Memorials in bread so that poor Diggers like himself could have something to eat. I think a Memorial that would give every Digger who wanted it a bath, a supper, a bed and a breakfast would be much better than

¹⁰ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

¹¹ Rae to J. Webster (RSL gen sec), 10 May 1933, NLA MS 6609/1, 7072B.

¹² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 11, 323-324.

¹³ *ibid.*, v. 10, 389-390.

wasting the thousands we are wasting
in building Memorials and building up
a big Military Department.¹⁴

Of the other replies to the RSL's circular
letter, a few professed support, while most
simply noted its contents.¹⁵

Despite this response, the RSL continued
to lobby on defence issues. In September 1933
New South Wales president L.A. Robb told
state congress delegates that the RSL federal
executive, 'working quietly and with no
fanfare of trumpets, had, in recent years,
directed the attention of various Federal
Governments to the inadequate state of
Australia's defence'.¹⁶ After Dyett, Robb was
the RSL's leading spokesman. He served with
the 2nd Division Signal Corps in Gallipoli,
Egypt, France and Belgium, was New South
Wales RSL president between 1930 and 1940,
represented the RSL at British Service Legion
(BESL) conventions in Toronto in 1931 and
London in 1933, and represented the BESL at
an American Legion convention in Detroit in
1931.¹⁷ Robb's comments captured the mood and

¹⁴ Maloney to Webster, 15 May 1933, NLA MS
6609/1, 7072B. This reply was despite
Maloney's obsession with 'the Japanese
threat' (ibid., 390).

¹⁵ NLA MS6609/1, 7072B.

¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 1933.

¹⁷ *Who's Who in the Commonwealth of
Australia*, 1950, Melbourne (?), 1950.

anxieties of the RSL. Amid a debate about rearmament at national congress in 1933, he warned that 'there were grave fears that the world was on the verge of another world war'.¹⁸ Another delegate noted that Germany had gas masks prepared, that Japan was preparing similarly, and that 'President Roosevelt says the United States is to continue arming'.¹⁹ In 1934 national congress urged the federal government to increase Australia's air forces 'to their maximum efficiency' and to make larger use of 'planes for coastal surveillance and aerial survey'.²⁰

Kristianson has argued that the 1932 national congress, at which defence assumed increasing prominence, also 'ended League support for "world peace" movements which had been evident earlier'.²¹ This support did not end so abruptly. Two months before the 1932 national congress Robb broadcast a radio address as part of a special publicity campaign by the League of Nations Union, telling his audience that

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November 1933.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, 15 August 1934.

²¹ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

one of the objects of the Returned Soldiers' League was to create a better understanding among the nations of the world, and thus bring about the great ideal of world peace ... The League of Nations is promoting cooperation amongst the nations more than any other body, and for that reason merits the support of everyone.²²

Delegates to the RSL's 1933 national congress resolved to arrange an international congress of ex-soldiers to formulate a common anti-war policy, a meeting to which representatives of all ex-service organisations in all ex-belligerent nations were to be invited. Victorian RSL president George Holland said that ex-servicemen could tell 'the world the true story of war, which was a different story to that told by some politicians'.²³ Dyett dutifully wrote to a number of ex-service organisations²⁴, but received little support. Among the replies, the Great War Veterans' Association of Newfoundland and the American Legion thought the problems of distance too great to overcome, the British Empire Service Legion of South Africa argued that 'the Conference as proposed could hardly

²² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1932.

²³ *ibid.*, 14 November 1933.

²⁴ Annual Report, 1933, 6, NLA MS6609/1, 7408B.

achieve what the League of Nations had failed to do', and the Comrades of the Great War (Ceylon) Association objected to the proposed inclusion of 'ex-enemy ex-servicemen'.²⁵

These discouraging replies did not kill the ideal of an international congress of ex-servicemen. Delegates to the 1935 congress reaffirmed their commitment to a congress by unanimously urging the British Empire Service League to convene immediately a conference of representatives of ex-soldiers' organisations 'throughout the world for the purpose of creating and extending goodwill among the nations, and of discussing ways of obtaining and preserving world peace'.²⁶ Nor did the RSL drop its support for the League of Nations. In 1935 national congress 'deplored' the outbreak of war in Abyssinia, but hoped that 'the efforts of the League of Nations will restore the peace of the world' and pledged to 'do all in its power towards the restoration and maintenance of that peace'. Delegates further resolved to associate the RSL with the constitutional principles of the League of Nations, which were to be discussed by RSL sub-branches.²⁷

²⁵ NLA MS6609/1, 7095B.

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 November 1935.

²⁷ *ibid.*

The RSL saw world peace as desirable and supported the League of Nations and the idea of a worldwide conference of ex-servicemen as a means towards this. But this support was always a concomitant to adequate defence measures, not a substitute for them. In a hierarchy of concerns and values, there were some things which the RSL was not prepared to sacrifice for the sake of support for international peace movements and their domestic advocates.

For example, the RSL was prepared to sponsor and attend a conference which included 'ex-enemy ex-servicemen', but to admit such men to its own ranks was quite a different question. The New South Wales RSL discussed this at state congress in 1932, where some delegates argued that such an action would 'offer a gesture towards world peace' and 'create a better feeling among the nations'.²⁸ The motion was defeated, with one delegate arguing that

the best supporters of their leagues were relatives of those who had laid down their lives. This was asking too much of them.²⁹

²⁸ *ibid.*, 19 August 1932.

²⁹ *ibid.* In March 1932 the South Australia RSL did extend honorary membership to the

In this case, the RSL's integrity as an organisation of Australian and British ex-servicemen took precedence over the rhetoric of creating a peaceful world through cooperation with former enemies.

Nor was this the only issue accorded preference. Anzac Day, for example, was a special occasion to be celebrated unchanged. In 1935 the Returned Soldiers' Anti-War Movement, an organisation reportedly of six or seven hundred returned men, 'many' of whom were British veterans³⁰, proposed to march as a separate unit on Anzac Day. The New South Wales RSL claimed to have no objection in principle to the Returned Soldiers' Anti-War Movement but opposed this proposal, and the state Anzac Day Commemoration Council - probably bending to RSL pressure or, as likely, comprising a majority of RSL members - prohibited it. The New South Wales RSL secretary explained:

The Anzac Day march is designed to honour the memories of the Anzacs who fell in the war, and was never intended to be used as an expression of political or other secondary feeling. The League offers no

crew of a visiting German warship, though only after some dissension. (State Board, 21 February 1933, 1373, 7 March 1933, 1379.)

³⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 1935.

criticism of and has not the slightest quarrel with the anti-war movement but it definitely will not allow that body or any other body to use the march for propaganda purposes.³¹

Most importantly, and as in the 1920s, the RSL saw Australia's national and racial heritage as paramount. Addressing the New South Wales branch of the League of Nations Union in December 1933, Robb said that the RSL, while not a pacifist organisation, was 'pacific up to the very last resort of war, but ... would rather have war than the sacrifice of ... racial and national independence and freedom'.³² In September 1933 the New South Wales RSL state congress confirmed a BESL resolution that affiliated ex-service bodies 'support any movement designed to achieve world peace, but, at the same time, maintain the safety of the British Empire'.³³ By 1937, the RSL seemed to accept the failure of the League of Nations, although it was loath to admit it. Congress that year recorded its 'approval and admiration of the efforts of the League of Nations and particularly the Government of

³¹ *ibid.*, 13 April 1935.

³² *ibid.*, 12 December 1933.

³³ *ibid.*, 30 September 1933.

Great Britain, to promote and maintain peace and a better understanding amongst the races of the world', but also resolved that

recognising the fact that there is [sic] still, through various causes, elements involving the risk of aggression and conflict, Congress agrees with the action of Great Britain in rearming and urges the Government of Australia to persist in the completion of such measures as are necessary to maintain inviolate our shores, cities and people.³⁴

With continuing rhetoric but increasing doubts about the efficacy of world peace movements, including the League of Nations, to prevent war, the RSL looked less for guarantees of peace and more for guarantees of defence readiness. It believed it found such guarantees in compulsory military training. The RSL had continually requested a reimposition of compulsory military service from the time the federal government suspended it in 1929, but after 1932 it stepped up this campaign significantly.³⁵ Each national congress between 1932 and 1935 called on the federal government to

³⁴ 22nd National Congress, 1937, Resolution 195, NLA MS6609/1, 7072B.

³⁵ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

reintroduce compulsory military training³⁶, while in 1936 the wording was changed to encompass a wider definition of conscription. Delegates at national conference that year resolved:

That, simultaneously with the re-introduction of universal military training, congress is of opinion that there should be some method of registration and organisation of the whole of Australia's resources of wealth, man-power, material and industry; and that in the event of an international crisis arising the whole of these should be conscripted.³⁷

Each subsequent national congress up to and including 1940 reaffirmed this resolution.³⁸

Concerns about youth unemployment also contributed to the League's developing preoccupation with compulsory military training. In 1933 federal congress unanimously resolved that the federal government should introduce compulsory

³⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1932, 13 November 1933, 15 August 1934, 23 November 1935.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 21 November 1936.

³⁸ Federal executive, Melbourne, 31 May 1940, 4, NLA MS 6609/3, records this.

military training for youths.³⁹ Archdeacon C.L. Riley from Western Australia argued that

the returned soldier had to watch the defences, not only from the point of view of defending the country, but from the point of view of training the youth for citizenship ...

[military training] is the biggest antidote I know for the larrikin push that Australia has got.⁴⁰

Delegate E.S. Watt claimed that, in New South Wales, there were 50,000 youths between the ages of 15 and 21 out of employment, and asked:

Was it not better for them to have some objective, even if it was military training? It was better than loafing about the streets. Good material was being wasted. These youths were anxious to do something.⁴¹

At national congress in 1936 Colonel L.M. Miller, governor of Hobart gaol, said that 'universal training was largely responsible for the decrease in larrikinism in Australia, and if it was in force today there would be less of crime'.⁴²

³⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 1933.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, 21 November 1936.

The RSL's concerns about defence and its calls for the reintroduction of compulsory military training dominated its agenda until 1939, when the outbreak of war brought the increased defence spending and state organisation of Australia's human, material and financial resources the RSL had wanted. There were other concerns, of which 'bread and butter' welfare issues were the most prominent. Of 160 motions presented to the 1932 national congress, for example, 60 concerned 'repatriation' or, more specifically, welfare benefits to returned soldiers or their dependants.⁴³ Among these 60 motions were those concerning allowances for soldiers over 55 years of age no longer able to work because of mental or physical disability, a reduction of interest on war service home loans, and reappraisal of all war service homes 'at present-day values'.⁴⁴

As returned soldiers reached middle age and as the effects of their war service came increasingly to be felt, the RSL became more concerned with pension-related issues. Debate on these issues illustrates not only the degree of cooperation between the state and federal instruments of the League but also

⁴³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1932.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

the way in which federal president Gilbert Dyett could influence the outcome of discussions. At 1935 national congress Dyett convinced delegates that a number of motions seeking technical amendments to the Repatriation Act's pension provisions should be withdrawn because they 'were provided for in the legislation now before the Federal Parliament'.⁴⁵ And when a delegate moved that the League lobby the federal government to give nursing sisters pensions at fifty years of age, Dyett

urged that the motion should be deferred for a year. A compromise had been reached [he said] between the League and the Government, and the age at which a returned sister would receive a pension had been fixed in the new bill at 55 years.

Another delegate 'pressed the motion', which was nevertheless defeated.⁴⁶

The impression of the RSL during the 1930s is of an organisation in which concern for defence and welfare issues is paramount, an organisation that is primarily concerned with safety, both in keeping Australia safe from external threats and safeguarding the

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 22 November 1935.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

welfare entitlements of its members. The RSL had had similar concerns during the 1920s, but had also attempted to address, both internally and publicly, and amid much soul-searching, a wide range of other issues such as the 'middle way' between capital and labour, the League's relationship to the union movement, the responsibility of the federal government to find employment for veterans, Australia's relationship with Britain, and the returned soldier's place in Australian society. A survey of the evidence during the 1930s - based on what the RSL did not say rather than what it did say - suggests that, by this time, the focus of the RSL's attention had become much more narrow and that the League was far more hesitant to become involved in contentious or 'political' issues than it had been during the 1920s.

This narrowing focus may have contributed to the RSL's growing membership during the 1930s. The issues of defence and welfare could engage the attention of members both as returned soldiers and civilians, and were without any obvious party political content. The importance of protecting returned soldiers and their dependants' welfare entitlements was something with which few returned soldiers could disagree.

Similarly most returned soldiers, despite differing political outlooks, were likely to agree that Australia needed to be adequately defended in time of war. The issue of defence was not without its distinctly political overtones, but the RSL avoided becoming involved in debates about sanctions or the desirability or otherwise of 'meddling' in foreign wars⁴⁷ and concentrated on lobbying for an 'adequate' defence force⁴⁸, choosing not to discuss the circumstances under which that defence force might be used. The issue of defence also brought together those elements within the RSL with opposing ideas about how the RSL should operate as a pressure group. Kristianson has noted that the RSL campaign during the 1930s for increased defence spending did not divide the organisation along the old lines of those who supported indirect tactics and those who supported direct tactics.⁴⁹ The campaign for increased defence measures diminished the criticism directed at Dyett because 'it was almost entirely a public campaign in which

⁴⁷ J.R. Robertson surveys the defence issues of the period in Crowley (ed), *A New History of Australia*, 450-457.

⁴⁸ Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 68.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 69.

the branches could adopt as aggressive an approach as they desired'.⁵⁰

The RSL's position at the end of the 1930s stood in stark contrast to that at the beginning of the 1920s. It is possible to speculate that, as the war receded further into the past and 'veterans' issues' began to lose some of their impact, as the RSL became a more experienced and unified pressure group, as returned soldiers aged and the longer-term effects of the war began to take their toll, as deteriorating economic conditions started both to distract attention further away from returned soldiers' welfare and to erode their benefits, and as it began to appear that Australia might become involved in war, the RSL's increasing membership was due to its concentration on issues which bore directly both on the hip pocket of returned soldiers and on defence, which had universal appeal to returned soldiers of varying political affiliations. Family, home and hearth could be protected economically by vigilant attention to ensure that returned soldiers' benefits were not eroded; family, home and hearth could be protected from an external enemy by an adequate defence force. A survey of the 1930s

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

suggests that this was a time when a preoccupation with the bread and butter issues affecting its membership and with national safety replaced the wider vision of a nation reborn out of the war, a vision which had encompassed all Australians. The RSL believed that victory offered opportunities to build a new Australia, but the political and social climate of postwar Australia and its own fears led the League to choose a conservative direction instead of a progressive one.

Conclusion

This thesis has two main themes: a history of the RSL in its formative years, and a study of the RSL and conservatism between 1916 and 1932. The introduction refers to 'conservative ideology' as a coherent set of ideas and values central to which is a desire to maintain the status quo, to 'conservative nationalism' as the term used in Australian history in conjunction with the shift in possession of nationalism from the Left to the Right in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and to 'digger conservatism' as either the end result of an erosion of returned soldiers' optimism or the backward-looking of returned soldiers and returned soldiers' organisations.

Many of the RSL's values did conform to those central to conservative ideology, particularly the belief that political change should be gradual not sudden. But the way in which the RSL looked at the world and responded to events and crises was not determined by reference to a conscious, or coherent and consistent, set of values and beliefs. The RSL did not conform to an

ideology. Instead, it drew guidelines for its attitudes and actions from a variety of experiences and sources. On issues which it could readily identify as 'soldiers' issues', such as pensions and federal government responsibility for repatriation, it was able to formulate a view based on its character as an ex-service organisation. On issues which it believed were political and more within the public domain, it had less success, both as a lobby group and in presenting a united front to the public. On such issues, recourse to the war experience of 1914-1918 could not help. While war experience might lead to agreement on some aspects of postwar life, it could also affect men in different ways and be a divisive, not unifying, force. Central to the RSL's survival was its ability to give expression to veterans' unity on 'bread and butter' issues while at the same time either sidestepping or compromising on 'difficult' political and social issues or concentrating on issues - such as defence - on which most members were likely to agree.

In postwar conservatism, the RSL represented the 'new' nationalism which had shifted from the preserve of the Left to that of the Right, the kind of nationalism which, as Geoffrey Serle wrote, allowed one to be an

'Australian' and a 'conservative imperialist' at the same time.¹ The RSL combined loyalty to Great Britain with a consciousness of being distinctly 'Australian'. The RSL also shared the ambivalence of many Australian 'conservative imperialists' toward Britain. But the RSL differed from other conservatives and conservative bodies because its character as an ex-service organisation meant that, in some areas, it was an advocate of change and led that change. The RSL believed that the state owed its existence to soldiers, and felt therefore that it was the duty of the state to ensure that its soldiers or their dependants were adequately repaid for soldiers' sacrifice. So the RSL contributed to an expanded role for the state, something which many conservatives continued to oppose.

Studying the RSL demonstrates that there are many problems in using the word 'conservative' in a general way to describe all those who supported the war. To do so obscures the multitude of variations in pro-war feeling. K.S. Inglis, in a seminal article on Australian society during the first world war, pointed out that the 'radical legend' of conscription 'does not make it clear that many who voted against

¹ Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, 90.

conscription believed whole-heartedly that the war was just'.² In the same way that many disparate groups were united by their opposition to the war, many people of wide-ranging views were united by Imperial loyalty, although there were other reasons for supporting the war. Among the difficulties the RSL encountered and could not resolve during the war was that a soldier could be loyal to the cause of Empire and support the continued prosecution of the war while opposing conscription. Gilbert Dyett, national RSL president for twenty-six years, did not believe any the less in the war effort because he was an anti-conscriptionist. It is significant that Dyett would not have been elected as RSL national president in 1917 or 1918 had he stood. The war had to have ended for that to happen.

Did the RSL contribute to the stability of postwar society, or was it a divisive force? Serle wrote that the change in the nature of nationalism from 'radical' to 'conservative' allowed a much wider group of Australians to identify themselves as Australian patriots without sacrificing their sense of Imperial loyalty.³ The RSL

² Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition', 36.

³ Serle, 'The Digger Tradition and Australian Nationalism', 150.

contributed to this because it represented and perpetuated the idea that there was no shame in calling oneself 'Australian'. Indeed, it was a matter for pride, and the RSL substantiated the claim by pointing to the AIF's war record. The RSL contributed to the stability of Australian society because, as Kevin Seggie has noted, preference in employment, land settlement, and War Service homes, all schemes which the RSL supported and lobbied for incessantly, turned veterans into 'little capitalists', giving them some stake in the political and social status quo.⁴ Government support for the RSL allowed the organisation, as hoped, to 'harness' returned soldiers.

But the RSL could also be a divisive force. As Lloyd Robson wrote, 'the returned soldier remained always a cut above everyone else'.⁵ The failure to enact conscription in Australia imparted a special status both to those who went to the war, and to 'eligibles' who did not. The RSL campaigned against 'eligibles', seeking their dismissal from the public service or demanding that the government compulsorily acquire their land

⁴ Seggie, 'Right Wing Extremism in Australia, 1919-1933', 36-37.

⁵ Robson, *Australia in the Nineteen Twenties*, 12.

for soldier settlement. There is also the matter of the RSL as 'owner' of the Anzac legend. The RSL believed this ownership to be exclusive. Civilian wartime allies remained allies, but the RSL did not consider them to be co-proprietors. Thus the RSL measured nationalism not simply by support for the war, but by frontline service in the war. The RSL's nationalism excluded not only civilian anti-conscriptionists and 'eligibles', but the majority of Australians - women, the young, the aged, and the handicapped.

The war had a profound effect on the subsequent direction of Australian society, and the RSL had a role in this. Australia manifested the symptoms of a society deeply traumatised by the events of 1914-18. On the one hand, Australia in the 1920s and 1930s was a society which believed that the experience of 1914-18 taught two main lessons. First, it confirmed that Australia was an isolated and vulnerable Pacific nation. Second, it taught that Australia must never again be as unprepared for war as conservatives believed it had been in 1914. Australians, and the RSL in particular, feared that these lessons might be forgotten.

On the other hand, Australians wanted to forget the horrors the first world war had

brought. Two things may have contributed to this. First, there was a natural, and necessary, inclination to put the past behind and return to everyday life. Second, there was an uncomfortable realisation that the 'lessons' of 1914-18 were more in the nature of questions to which there were no easy answers. How was Australia to defend itself in the Pacific when there was no guarantee that Britain could, or would, come to its aid? If Australia was to build its population to a size which would safeguard it against a threat from Asia - the impossibility of which was never admitted - how was this to be achieved without recourse to immigration from countries other than the United Kingdom? How was Australia to meet the threat of subversion within the constraints of a parliamentary democracy? And what identity was Australia to build as a European nation in Asia?

The RSL, and many conservatives, looked back to 1914-18 to provide answers for dealing with the questions of the present. They could not always find answers there. The sense of anxiety and even fear which this gave rise to entrenched a conservative obsession with 'national safety' and

'national integrity'.⁶ Australia became, in Manning Clark's words, a nation of 'survivors'.⁷

In the years immediately following the war, the RSL had a vision of Australia's future which was wider than concern for national safety, national integrity and the material welfare of its members. It could not sustain such a vision. The RSL could only achieve unity on 'bread and butter' issues, so it sidestepped the others or chose them carefully to avoid conflict. Yet these other issues dealt with fundamental questions of what Australia was and what it could or wanted to be. Because it never truly confronted these questions, the RSL, while advocating and leading domestic change in the area of social welfare, contributed to and perpetuated a status quo which eschewed vision and progress for national stability, national safety and national integrity. The idea of a better Australia for all Australians became replaced by an overriding concern to protect and extend the benefits of a few. In this, the RSL reflected the preoccupations of conservatives for at least the next two decades. Australia had to be

⁶ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Ringwood, Vic., 1986, 191.

⁷ *ibid.*, 191.

kept safe against both domestic and international enemies, real or imagined. What was wanted was not a new or reformed society, but a further buttressing of the existing one. There could be no place in these preoccupations for the kind of visionary nationalism which had existed in Australia before the war.

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