Conscription

Fifty years ago the issue of conscription was resolved in a referendum. The voting was extremely close with 1,160,033 recording a vote against conscription for overseas service and 1,087,557 recording a vote in favor.

But the legend was made and reconfirmed in a further referendum in 1917. By this time the majority against conscription had doubled.

It is not surprising that high on the list of priorities for anti-conscriptionists in 1966 is another referendum. Nor is it surprising that many, especially the older generations, hark back to 1916 and bathe that time in glory.

As then so now the motives of anti-conscriptionists vary. In the period of the World War I there were those who opposed conscription because it contributed to an imperialist war. The open opponents of imperialism then included many of the Irish who had their own quarrel with imperialist Britain. There were those who opposed all war, those who opposed war on moral and religious grounds, and there were those with quite dubious reasons.

Among these were quite vocal groups who had worked out to their satisfaction that conscription was a plot to undermine “White Australia”. They reasoned that the “yellow hordes” would arrive here, or even be encouraged here, if our young manhood was overseas.
The point here is that anti-conscription, in 1916 as in 1966, cannot be seen as a united ideological viewpoint.

It might also be stated that most people have viewed conscription differently at different periods of Australia’s history. Only the pacifists have maintained a total objection to all forms of conscription at all times.

While the reasons for opposing conscription vary one may not dismiss the traditions established in 1916, nor the tradition of anti-authoritarianism which is well established in Australian history. Never less it is well not to overestimate these.

Opinion polls have established fairly clearly that the present majority of voters do not oppose conscription as such nor does a majority oppose Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam.

The real hurly burly against conscription came when it was clear that conscripts would go to Vietnam. A clear majority opposes the use of conscripts in that war.

It is rather obvious that most Australians feel some disquiet about Australia’s ability to defend herself. The “yellow peril” theory is not logical but it has been a consistent thread in our history.

Fears have been fanned in recent years by combining the old prejudice with anti-communism. The skilful use, and misuse, of statements from China and Indonesia have helped build a public case.

These is not much use ignoring this situation and merely stating that no-one threatens us. This may be the truth, yet it is less than convincing to many. While not inventing enemies it is necessary to see that many people will not oppose conscription, because they believe it to be a genuine attempt at defence preparations.

Why then the opposition to the use of conscripts in Vietnam. The various reasons tend to overlap, but by examining them it may be noted that there is a real lack of conviction about the actual war. It is not enough, indeed an underestimation, to suggest that the majority are opposed to overseas conscription in isolation from the war in Vietnam. Opposition to the use of conscripts in Vietnam flows out of that war and could lead to majority opposition to the war.
Naturally some opponents to the use of conscripts in Vietnam are pacifists and they base their opposition on moral grounds. But pacifists are a small section of the community. The moral position of most opponents flows with that of the pacifists but is related to this particular war.

The view expressed in the "Catholic Advocate" is a moral objection. It raises the question whether Australia should be involved in this war, whether our Government has done enough to resolve the problem before resorting to fighting and whether a Government has the right to commit conscripts on an issue which so clearly divides the community.

Some of the young people who have burned their draft cards reflect these views. They don't want to fight in this war. Many of their statements tackle the fundamentals of the Government's case.

They, and those who support them, argue against the domino theory. No doubt those who fear the "yellow peril" give some credence to the idea that if Vietnam ever gets into the hands of its rightful owners everyone in Asia will want to come and live here.

But the argument against the domino theory is tackled and often from a moral viewpoint. People query the morality of preventing the Vietnamese from deciding their own future just to gain some theoretical advantage for ourselves at some future date. They do this even when they are anti-communist, knowing that a government free from outside interference in Vietnam may very well be communist.

They argue against the RSL line that we must fight "them" as far away from our shores as possible. Again the objection tends towards a moral judgment, when people ask if we have the right to defend Australia on the Mekong when we would give no one the right to defend themselves on the Murray.

Not the least important viewpoint is that which challenges the methods of this war. Through newspapers, television and official communications there is wide knowledge of the use and effects of napalm, of gas, of bombing and of torture. It is becoming more widely known that training methods are not exactly humane.
Again moral issues are raised. Some are revolted at the thought of being a party to the use of terror weapons; others raise for discussion the concepts of war crimes established at the Nuremburg Trials; others insist that it is impermissible to violate the Geneva Accords.

The Government claims that others broke the Geneva Agreement first, but many reply that two wrongs never did make a right. Still others compare Korea, a United Nations action no matter how crude, with the intervention in Vietnam.

Even those who totally oppose American and Australian actions and support the position of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam base much of their position on the moral right of all countries to their independence free from interference.

When we come to one of the main arguments of the Government (that is, that we support our big ally now so that she will come to our aid in the future) a lot of people, facts to the contrary, give support. This reason is often given by many who support Australia's commitment in Vietnam and yet oppose the use of conscripts there. One can support the payment of protection money; but it is much more difficult to claim that it is an honorable thing.

Yet even with this argument, more and more question its validity. After all the Americans only helped us in World War II after Pearl Harbor. And if we need to make a sacrifice now then why not everyone, why just the few voteless conscripts unlucky enough to win the lottery?

It is from this disquiet that the question is widely raised of lowering the voting age, the one minor concession the Government seems to be considering, and the need for more general sacrifices by business interests and, those who escape the draft. The point in all this is that moral issues must be heeded if political expression is to be found for them, but that moral attitudes do not necessarily beget political attitudes.

It may be that the Government can recoup some of its lost popularity by giving votes to the conscripts and by calling up alien immigrants. The vote won't really
give conscripts a say, especially if they don't receive it until after they have been conscripted but it may provide a bit of democratic window dressing.

The conscription of aliens will undoubtedly affect the migration program, but it would suggest that the Government wanted to share the sacrifice around and the latent chauvinism of so many Australians might bring back some support to the Government.

For everyone in the labor movement who wants to see opposition to conscription expressed in the defeat of the Government, attention has to be paid to more than "anti-conscription". For those who believe that opposition to conscription can lead to majority opposition to the war then, the politicalisation of the moral issues, now involved, is vital.

Thus concrete alternatives, immediate as well as ultimate, are needed to end Australian involvement in Vietnam. It would be a serious mistake to regard even the present opposition to the war as opposition to the United States and a desire to see that country defeated. In this context the role of the nations which negotiated the Geneva Accords, the role of the neutral nations and of the United Nations cannot be underestimated.

High on the list, too, is the need to discuss more widely foreign policy and its corollary, defence policy.

What is needed involves rational alternatives to the present collision policy with Asia combined with consideration of the defence problem genuinely independent of the pressures of the United States' administration and the regional ambitions of Australia's leading investors.