FIFTY years ago, in October 1916, Australians voted against sending conscripts to the battlefields of the First World War. A year later, in December 1917, they again refused to permit this despite all the pressures on them to agree.

The No vote on conscription has been treasured in the collective memory of the Australian labor movement as a great victory. It has been disparaged by conservatives as a temporary lapse from patriotism. For two years at a critical period of war and turbulence the question of conscription dominated Australian life, far beyond the ordinary interest in politics. The rejection of conscription was of great significance, despite being a negative victory, of saying “No”. Many motives, often unclear, were brought together in one inescapable act of decision: the question, what kind of a country Australia was and should be? So the defeat of conscription became part of the national framework in which the same issue is being debated today.

Compulsory military service, at home or abroad, is not a good or a bad thing in itself. It can only be judged by its circumstances, purposes and effects. In 1916-17 conscription meant, as it means today, the forcible sending of Australians abroad to fight in the wars of imperialism.

In primitive society every man was a warrior. The duty of bearing arms carried with it equality of rights. In the absence of a ruling class and separate state power the community itself was police and army. The citizen of the Greek or Roman city state still exercised some of this effectual democracy, although
now he excluded the slaves from it. When the ancient empires which grew from the city states made war a business, the citizen soldier became a professional. Under feudalism warfare was the essential occupation of each lord, on which his position depended. Lords fought for profit, soldiers were hired and serfs conscripted. The devastation of warring feudalism was a powerful reason why the populace turned to a central monarchy to curb feudalism and create a national state.

England, the first capitalist country, could now remove fighting from ordinary life. The predatory wars which England waged from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century were largely fought by a volunteer navy and army. In the nineteenth century, when Britain was the world’s workshop and banking house, war was relegated to colonial outposts. The dirty business at the other side of the globe needed only a handful of soldiers attracted by glory or pay. Hence nineteenth century Britain was non-militarist. This was one side of the liberal tradition of civilian rule, citizen rights, laissez faire and business freedom.

Australia inherited these attitudes and took them further. Convicts were not alone in hating callous jailers and upstart officers. Settlers and convicts both, and their children, implanted in the Australian character a dislike of being ordered around. The freedom of the gold rushes re-inforced this, the expansive years before the depression of the 1890’s confirmed it; and then in the struggles which surrounded the formation of the Labor Party solidarity against hostile employers and governments was embedded in the labor movement. Australians, happily isolated from the world, needed no armies. Armies were undemocratic, strongholds of caste division and unthinking obedience. This was one firm basis on which Australians rejected conscription in 1916-17 and doubt it today.

Meanwhile, the peaceful period of capitalism was coming to an end. Other countries had caught up with Britain industrially. From the 1880’s the epoch of imperialism brought greater rivalries between empires and the military race which culminated in the First World War. European countries which had fought for national unity now prepared for wider battles. War, like industry, was transformed by technology. Warfare now required mass armies, which only compulsory military service could provide. Britain still avoided this.

So did Australia, but already the influences for conscription
were growing. The White Australia policy, the strongest expression of nationalism, has a racial basis of Anglo-Saxon superiority as well as its economic basis of prohibiting cheap labor. Boys from the bush and suburbs joined the militia in each scare as a foreign warship appeared in the Pacific. A contingent was sent, unasked, to the Soudan Campaign fiasco in 1885. Volunteers abounded for the Boer War at the end of the century. Only a tiny minority opposed this blatant grab of the Boer Republics; most gloried in Australian participation. Australians were not immune to the currents of imperialism. Many, with a curious off-stage jingoism, half hoped for a blood letting which would be the mark of nationhood. They got it in the First World War.

Within the labor movement the debate over compulsory military service became open. Hughes and Holman, the young radicals of the 1890's, favored it. So did most of the leaders of the Labor Party. Their favorite example was Switzerland, scarcely typical even of Europe, their argument was that universal training ensured equality of sacrifice and a democratic army. They confused the power of a people in arms with the helplessness of forced soldiers. Armed peoples have indeed made and defended revolutions, in modern times from the levée en masse of the French Revolution onwards. But the armies which governments conscripted in the early twentieth century were to do as they were told in the service of imperialism. Australian leaders, including those in the Labor Party, wanted Australian control of the armed forces, which they would then willingly place at the disposal of Britain.

Compulsory military training commenced in Australia in 1911, endorsed by both the Liberal and Labor Parties. Boys of twelve had to register, their cadet training began at fourteen years and continued from age eighteen in the citizen forces.

In the two and a half years before the outbreak of war in 1914, over 27,000 prosecutions were launched against parents of youths for failure to register. The usual penalty was a fine, but 5,732 youths were sentenced to imprisonment in military or civil jails.* Compulsion had been met by spontaneous and determined opposition. Amongst those prominent in it were

convinced socialists such as Harry Holland. This mass civil disobedience was threatening the continuation of compulsory military service before the war began.

Australia was swept into the First World War on a tide of patriotism and imperial fervor in which Liberal and Labor Parties alike promised their utmost support to Britain. Labor, winning the election of September 1914, formed the government. W. M. Hughes, who succeeded Fisher as Labor Prime Minister towards the end of 1915, believed that the needs of the war over-rote all else. Only the militant and international socialists of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and some women pacifists stood out in opposition to the war itself.

There was no lack of volunteers for the forces. Yet questionnaires and war census cards soon hinted at compulsion, military and civil. In January 1916, conscription became law in Britain and was being discussed in Australia. Hughes, visiting Britain, was avid to increase Australia's part in the war. On his return he announced in August 1916 that a referendum would be held on conscription for overseas service. The movement against it had already started in a small way, now the battle was joined.

The forces were very unequal. In favor of conscription were the Prime Minister, his cabinet, the Federal Opposition, eleven out of the twelve State Premiers and Opposition leaders, employers' federations, chambers of commerce, every conservative politician and public figure, nearly all church leaders, the newspapers. Censorship, intimidation and prosecutions under the War Precautions Act were used against the opponents of conscription. They were branded as shirkers, pro-Germans and traitors in a fury of hysterical "patriotism". Every power was used to crush opposition. Even the question was loaded. In 1916 the electors were asked to vote:

Are you in favour of the Government having, in this grave emergency, the same compulsory powers over citizens in regard to requiring their military service, for the term of this war, outside the Commonwealth, as it now has in regard to military service within the Commonwealth?

In 1917, more simply:

Are you in favor of the proposal of the Commonwealth Government for reinforcing the A.I.F. overseas?
When conscription was rejected by a narrow majority in 1916 and 1917 it was a triumph for a mass movement which fought its way from the ground against overwhelming odds. This movement was spearheaded by a handful of class conscious militants. It won the support of most of the labor movement, against their leaders. In the vanguard too were pacifists and liberals of great courage who proclaimed a message of humanity. Some Catholic leaders made a public stand. The brunt of the campaign was carried by young, unknown men and women who overcame every obstacle with vigor and originality. When it came to the test they had won to their side the silent majority.

In 1916 and again in 1917 only a few Australians wholly opposed the war and the imperialism which caused it. Many others, however, opposed conscription for a variety of reasons. They resisted it as tyrannical, a weapon in the hands of a dictatorial government to undermine Australian liberties. They feared it as a permanent step towards the militarisation of Australia. They baulked at the inequality of sacrifice which would send ordinary young men to die whilst profiteering flourished. They dreaded the endless slaughter of Australian youth. Some, like Archbishop Mannix, supported Irishmen fighting against British rule. Others yearned for Australia's lost isolation, or simply wanted to keep out of the army. The vote for “No” summed up many motives.

So conscription brought to the surface underlying conflicts. The defeat of the referenda was a defeat for reaction in every way. It ensured that Australia would continue in the liberal democratic tradition, that militarism would be restricted, that an independent national decision would be made on overseas wars. The Labor Party had been split, but split by purging it of its right wing.

Disillusionment with the war grew after it had ended. Although no foreign threat to Australia was apparent, compulsory military training remained until the Scullin government discontinued it in 1929. It was re-introduced by the Menzies government after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Conscription for overseas service, however, could never have been acceptable in Australia during the period of the phoney war.

The situation was completely different in 1942, so conscrip-
tion for overseas service was different in substance from what it had been. Australia was fighting for national survival against Japanese aggression, as part of the world front against the fascist powers. A total war effort was mounted under the leadership of the Labor Party and with the full support of the labor movement. The authority to send soldiers to defined areas of the Western Pacific was given to the Curtin government without difficulty, for the government was trusted in the defence of the country. This particular act was a minor part of everything else which was being done, when sacrifices were made willingly because they were necessary. In this war against imperialism Australians put aside their isolation to play a full part. The victory was historic, and the world would never be the same again.

History moves slowly most of the time, despite the flurry on the surface. Large changes mature for many years before their growth forces them into the open. Then a cross-roads is reached from which a path into the future must be chosen. Today Australia's borrowed time is running out and decisions have to be faced. Again they centre on conscription.

Today conscription means conscription for the American war of intervention in Vietnam. Hence it becomes the touchstone for the great questions of the time. Australia's national independence, its relations with Asia, its future development, come to a point here. This is the broadest issue on which criticism of our government's policy centres. Many strands are brought together to be resolved by a verdict on conscription, as they were fifty years ago. A strong and deep-seated Australian tradition opposes it.

The vote against conscription in 1916 and 1917 did not stop the war, nor Australia's participation in it, nor secure a just and lasting peace. Hughes won an election in 1917 and again in 1919 despite conscription. This may well happen again. But the struggle against conscription made its contribution to the ending of the war, to the revitalisation of the Labor Party and the trade union movement, to the A.L.P. socialisation objective of 1921, to the formation of the Communist Party in 1920. Above all, it shaped to some extent the future of Australia, for in this struggle the forces of reaction and the forces of progress contended at a time of decision. The path of reaction was blocked, the path of progress was opened.