



Investigating the Australian
experience of conscription

Unit 6



Investigating the Australian experience of conscription



Curriculum application

- English
- Time, continuity and change (History)

Learning outcomes

By the end of this unit students will be better able to:

- describe and explain a significant event in Australian history that has contributed to national identity
- critically analyse an aspect of change over time
- empathise with people in their own time
- evaluate the consequences for people of a change to a significant law
- critically analyse the working of the democratic process in a controversial area of human rights – conscription
- discuss the rights and responsibilities of governments and individuals in areas where there is significant dissent.

Key issues for discussion

- What is conscription?
- Why do governments sometimes introduce it?
- Is it a fair system?
- Should women be conscripted?
- Is conscription ever, or always, justifiable?
- Do people have the right to break a law imposing conscription if they disagree with it?
- How should the Government respond to people who oppose conscription and refuse to be part of it?

Background briefing

In Australia the issue of conscription is most strongly associated with the Vietnam War.

To explore the issue students need to understand the way conscription was applied at that time. This historical knowledge will help them focus their ideas on specific aspects of the question, and will also provide a valuable context for their ideas on the question generally.

Teachers' Guide

Suggested classroom strategies

- 1** The Vietnam War is ancient history to students, not part of their culture. The cartoons (Resource 1) will help stimulate ideas and images of the period for them. They should be encouraged to talk to older family members about the 1960s and early 1970s.
- 2** Teachers might invite people to visit the classroom and talk about the time and the issues. You might even encourage a pro- and anti-conscriptionist to re-create in the classroom the arguments that were common at the time.
- 3** The point of the historical perspective is that it raises most of the issues still relevant to any consideration of conscription today. The main element that has changed is gender roles – a modern proposal for conscription would probably include equal treatment for women and for men, a very different situation from that of the 1960s.

Correct order for the stages for question 3, Resource 3:

- 1** There is a need for more soldiers.
- 2** Government receives advice from military experts about the numbers required.
- 3** A system is devised to select the required number from within the eligible male population.
- 4** Cabinet approves the proposed system.
- 5** Legislation is passed in the Federal Parliament to create the system.
- 6** Eligible males are required to register.
- 7** A draw selects the required number.
- 8** The selected men are assessed for their suitability for service.
- 9** The men are trained.
- 10** Some of the trained men are selected for overseas service.



Forming hypotheses about the conscription system

Australian servicemen and servicewomen were involved in the war in Vietnam from 1962 to 1973. The Australian Government had three main reasons for this involvement: to support the South Vietnamese Government against invasion by North Vietnam; to stop the spread of Communism through Asia and towards Australia; and to support our major ally, the United States, in its commitment to the conflict. Australia's military involvement included professional troops who had chosen to join the Australian Defence Force, and those who had been conscripted for service. Each group represented about half of the total number of men who fought in Vietnam

- 1 Look at Source 1A – F, the cartoons about aspects of Australia during the Vietnam War.

Ask the following questions of each cartoon. You can do this individually, or you might divide the cartoons between members of your group.

- Who is shown in the cartoon?
- What is the context or setting?
- What are the characters doing and saying?
- How does the cartoonist depict the people? (For example, are they figures of fun, sympathetically shown, realistic, exaggerated, etc?)

From this you will be able to work out these last two questions:

- What is the **attitude** of the cartoonist to the situation?
- What **message** does the cartoonist want you to consider?



'Our little girl is going to her first riot'. Cartoon by Petty



Cartoon by Rigby



'You'd better start praying that the VC send some help back, sonny!'
Cartoon by Rigby



'The Ratbag Element'. Cartoon by Petty



'A great time to start searching your conscience!'
Cartoon by Petty



Ballot day for National Service: 'Lo! The smell of battle in the air and sounds of distant musketry ... 'tis the call to arms!! ...' Cartoon by Rigby

Peter Cook, *Australia and Vietnam 1965–1972*, La Trobe University, 1991

2 If these cartoons were the only information you had about Australia and the war, what conclusions could you draw about:

- why we were involved
- how extensive that involvement was
- the attitudes of Australians to the war
- what conscription meant
- people's attitudes to conscription
- who was and was not involved in protests
- the impacts of the war on Australian society?

Record your ideas in a grid like this:

Aspect	Your hypothesis, and your reasons for having this expectation
Why we were involved	
How conscription worked	
Responses of different groups to conscription	
Nature of Australian involvement in the war	
Impacts of the war on Australian society.	

You will be able to test some of these hypotheses as you complete the other Investigations in this unit.



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What is conscription?

Conscription for military service is drafting people (usually men, but sometimes also women) into the military for a period of compulsory service.

1 One of the main aims of this unit is to help you develop a set of questions to use in interviewing people who lived through the period under investigation.

Draw up a grid like this, and add any other questions to it that seem important. You should jot down relevant points or important thoughts as you work through the Investigations. Some questions have been listed to start you off.

Key aspects of the National Service system in Australia during the Vietnam War	Comments / ideas
Why was it introduced?	
How were people personally affected by it?	
What impacts did it have on society?	

Look at the following timeline of the history of conscription in Australia, and answer these questions.

- 2** List the years when the Australian government has been able to conscript people.
- 3** List the years when it has been able to send those conscripts overseas to fight.
- 4** Under what circumstances have governments sought to introduce conscription?
- 5** Why do you think it has been resisted in some cases, but not in others?
- 6** From your existing knowledge of the Vietnam War period, what do you think would have been the reaction of people to introducing conscription in Australia then?

Timeline of Conscription in Australian History

1901	Federation of the six separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia. The new Commonwealth Government was given power in the Australian Constitution of 1901 to make laws affecting defence.
1903	Defence Act passed. This Act gave the Commonwealth Government power to form a national military force, and the power to conscript people for military service within Australia. The Act did not give the Government the power to send conscripted troops overseas.
1911	'Boy conscription' system commenced. The Commonwealth Government instituted a system of compulsory military training for all males aged between 12 and 26. This system was observed by most, though there were many prosecutions of those who did not fulfil their training obligations. By the year 1915, 636 000 males had complied, 34 000 had been prosecuted for failure to comply with the system, and 7 000 had been imprisoned for a period of time.

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1914	Outbreak of World War I. Many Australian males volunteered for service in the war.
1916	First conscription plebiscite (or referendum). By 1916 the huge casualties of trench warfare on the Western Front, together with a decline in recruiting numbers in Australia, combined to lead the Commonwealth Government to call a plebiscite to introduce conscription for overseas service. The Commonwealth had the constitutional power to change the <i>Defence Act</i> to introduce conscription for overseas service, but did not have the numbers in the Senate. So the plebiscite (really a public opinion poll, and not technically a referendum, which is a public vote to authorise changing the Constitution) was designed to persuade a few Senators to allow a change to the <i>Defence Act</i> to be made. The issue bitterly divided Australian society. The plebiscite was narrowly defeated by 51% to 49%.
1917	Second conscription plebiscite. The Commonwealth Government tried again to get public approval to extend the existing power of conscription for home service to apply to overseas service. The proposal again created bitterness and division within Australian society, and was again defeated – this time by a slightly larger, though still very small, margin.
1939	Outbreak of World War II. Australians again volunteered in large numbers, and served in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. All unmarried men aged 21 could be called up for three months' training. These men could only serve in Australia.
1941	Entry of Japan into the war. Japan swept through Asia in December 1941, and seemed to be invincible.
1942	Threat to Australia. By early 1942 parts of northern Australia had been bombed, 20 000 Australians were Prisoners of War, and Japan was invading New Guinea. It seemed that Australia was under threat of attack and even invasion.
1943	Civilian and military conscription. Australia had in effect two armies – volunteers who could be sent anywhere to fight, and conscripts who could only fight in a strictly defined area of 'Australian territory'. To many this seemed both inefficient and inequitable – conscripted American troops were serving in Australia and New Guinea, while conscripted Australians were not being sent to these danger areas. Civilian men and women were being conscripted (or 'manpowered') and made to serve in vital industries in place of those who had joined the services.
1943	Military conscription extended. The Commonwealth Parliament amended the <i>Defence Act</i> to extend the definition of areas to which conscripted servicemen could be sent. This included all major war zones in the Pacific area. In effect Australia could now for the first time send its conscripts overseas to fight in the same areas as the volunteers. This was achieved by a change to the words of the <i>Defence Act</i> in Parliament and did not require a plebiscite or referendum. Ironically the Prime Minister of the day, John Curtin, had been jailed in 1916 for opposing conscription in World War I. The changes caused some public resentment – but seemed to have popular support.
1950	Start of Korean War.
1951	National Service introduced. All Australian males aged 18 had to register for 176 (later 140) days of training. The aim was to have large numbers of trained men ready to be called into service as the need arose. In 1957 the system was changed to emphasise skill rather than numbers. The system was ended in 1959.
1964	National Service introduced. This applied to selected 20 year olds, who were to have two years' continuous full-time service.
1972	National Service Act repealed. The system was abolished as one of the first acts of the newly elected Commonwealth Labor Government in December 1972.





How did the system of National Service during the Vietnam War work? Was it a fair and equitable system?

Imagine that Australia is involved in a conflict, and that people are needed in the Australian Defence Force. The Government decides to introduce conscription to get the required numbers, but not everybody is required. Approximately one in one hundred of the adult (over 18) population is needed.

- 1 List the possible ways you might do this. For example, you might just pick every 100th person at random or you might select every person who is a certain age (say 18 year olds); or there might be other ways you can suggest.
- 2 Select what you think is the best system, and list the advantages and disadvantages or problems of your chosen system.

This is the situation that the Australian Government faced in 1964. They wanted to increase the numbers of troops available for combat overseas in Vietnam, and they had to work out a system for getting the numbers they needed. How well did they do it?

- 3 Here are stages needed to put the system into effect. Put them into a logical sequence from 1 to 10. Number 1 has been done to get you started.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Legislation is passed in the Federal Parliament to create the system.
<input type="checkbox"/>	A draw selects the required number.
<input type="checkbox"/>	A system is devised to select the required number from within the eligible male population.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cabinet approves the proposed system.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Eligible males are required to register.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Government receives advice from military experts about the numbers required.
1	There is a need for more soldiers.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Some of the trained men are selected for overseas service.
<input type="checkbox"/>	The men are trained.
<input type="checkbox"/>	The selected men are assessed for their suitability for service.

- 4 List and explain what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this system for the Australian community today. For example, you might say that women as well as men ought to be included; or that everybody ought to be included; or that there ought to be an election on the issue first; and so on.

Strengths	Weaknesses

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- 5 Put together your 'perfect' system – the most effective and fair one you can imagine. List the steps it would take. You may need to come back and make changes, additions or deletions as you work through the remaining information.

Steps

- 6 Now look at this description of the system used in Australia during the Vietnam War, and answer the questions about it. Remember that your attitudes and values today may not have been the attitudes and values of most Australians then. The description is based on a National Archives of Australia display written by John Knott.

The National Service system during the Vietnam War

A Bill to amend the existing *National Service Act* was introduced into the House of Representatives on 11 November 1964.

It provided for the registration of all 20 year old males, and then for those selected, two years continuous service in the Regular Army (followed by three in the Army Reserve), including the possibility of overseas service.

Registration for National Service began on 1 January 1965. All males whose twentieth birthday fell within a specific six month period were required to register. Only Indigenous Australians, serving members of the permanent Military Forces and, prior to 1967, non-British migrants were exempt. (Many Indigenous Australians and non-British migrants, however, did serve as volunteers in the services in the Vietnam war.)



[Registration poster MP 1357/43
National Archives of Australia]



Marbles, tray and hopper, MP1357/63.
National Archives of Australia
Tattersalls barrel. Tattersalls Australia

A ballot of birth-dates chose those selected for call-up. This method had first been used in 1957 for an earlier National Service training scheme.

Ballots were held every March and September. One hundred and eighty-four numbered marbles were placed in a barrel. Each marble represented two dates, one in the first half of the year and one in the second. The barrel was spun and one marble at a time was withdrawn.

The number of marbles drawn at each ballot varied. Although the Army's enlistment requirements remained constant (4 200 National Servicemen every six months), the number of birth-dates chosen had to take account of the number registered, likely exemptions and deferments, probable medical examination failures, and the number previously balloted-in whose temporary deferment was ending.



At the first ballot, on 10 March 1965, 96 marbles were drawn. Thereafter the number decreased. Only 30 marbles were drawn in September 1969 and March 1970.

All 16 National Service ballots took place at the Melbourne headquarters of Tattersalls, and a Tattersalls lottery barrel was used for the draw.

The first 11 National Service ballots were conducted in secret. The media were allowed to photograph the drawing of the first marble and then ushered from the room. The actual birth-dates chosen were only made public in 1973. The Government representative who presided at the early ballots, Don Chipp, justified the policy by saying it was 'a personal matter between the Government and the lads concerned'.

Criticism of the secrecy finally forced the Government to give way. At the ballot held on 28 September 1970, the media were allowed to observe all the proceedings and the birth-dates drawn were published. The results of all later ballots were also made public through the media.

- 7 Who was eligible for conscription?
- 8 For how long would they serve?
- 9 Draws were secret. Why do you think the Government did this?
- 10 What advantages and disadvantages might a secret draw have?
- 11 The Minister for Labour and National Service, William McMahon, called the Bill 'an historic one. Never before have we taken action of the kind this Bill authorises.'
What was unique about this system of conscription in Australian history?

Registration for National Service was compulsory.

Unlike earlier military training and conscription schemes there were no reserve occupations allowed under the 1964 legislation. The only recognised categories for exemption were:

- physical or mental disability
- those at theological college or undergoing instruction to become a minister of religion
- ministers of religion, or members of a religious order
- conscientious objection to all war (and not just to a specific war).



Tony Fewings registered for National Service in January 1967. Balloted in and called up in July 1967, he subsequently served in Vietnam. Although he accepted overseas service, his mother became an opponent of conscription and the war. Tony returned to Australia in 1969.

[Completed registration form and call-up letter, PT870/1, 5015531; photograph, K396/3, Fewings, A.J.]

Those called up for National Service could apply to have their service deferred.

Indefinite deferment was granted to those married before the call-up action commenced or who had volunteered to serve for six years in the part-time Civilian Military Force.

Limited deferment was granted to apprentices and full-time tertiary students until they had completed their courses. Limited deferment was also granted to those serving criminal sentences and those able to prove to a court that their conscription would cause 'exceptional hardship' to themselves, their parents or their dependants.



Men who had been balloted in and to whom exemptions did not apply, or whose deferment had expired, had to pass a series of medical and other examinations. Overall, 44 per cent of those called up were rejected on medical, psychological, educational or security grounds.

There are many stories about men who were called up faking medical complaints or exhibiting psychological problems in order to be exempted. But such tactics are unlikely to have had a significant impact.

Australia had only military 'advisors' in Vietnam when National Service was introduced. In April 1965 Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that a battalion of combat troops (about 1 000 men) would be sent. The size of Australia's military commitment increased progressively to its peak of 8 300 men serving in Vietnam in 1968.

The first National Servicemen left Australia for Vietnam in April 1966. In all, 19 450 National Servicemen served in Vietnam. They made up 41.5 per cent of the total Australian commitment.

Australia began reducing the number of troops in Vietnam in November 1970. Only 128 military 'advisors' remained when the Whitlam Labor Government was elected in December 1972. Under the new Government these were quickly withdrawn, the *National Service Act* repealed, all anti-war prisoners released, and all remaining prosecutions for draft resistance dropped.

- 12 Who was exempt?
- 13 Why do you think the four categories of exemption were allowed?
- 14 Why do you think other categories were not allowed?
- 15 Do you think the Government had devised an efficient, fair and equitable system?

Look at the table below, showing the numbers who proceeded to each stage of the National Service selection process.

- 16 Work out the proportions or ratios for each box.

Statistics of registrations and their outcomes

Registrations 804 286	Statistical chances of a 20 year old being:	Statistical chances of a man who was balloted in being:	Statistical chances of a conscripted soldier being:	Statistical chances of a conscript in Vietnam being:
Of these, the number balloted in was: 237 048	Balloted in: 1 in			
Of these, the number accepted for service was: 63 740	Accepted: 1 in	Accepted: 1 in		
Of these, the number posted to Vietnam was: 19 450	Posted: 1 in	Posted to Vietnam: 1 in	Posted: 1 in	
Of these, the number wounded in Vietnam was: approximately 1 500	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in
Of these, the number of conscripts killed in Vietnam was: 200	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in

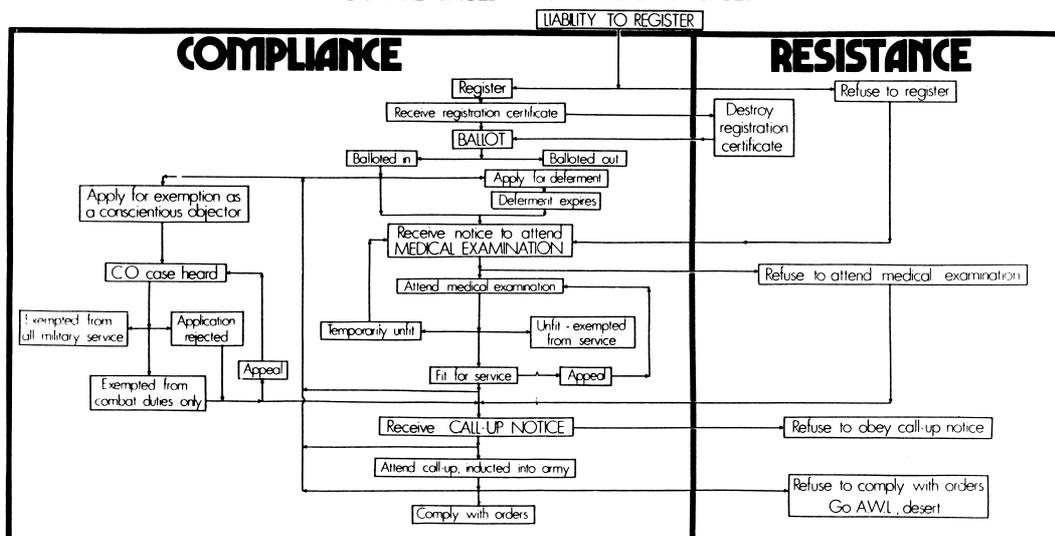
- 17 Do these statistics help you to develop your answers to question 15 above?

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Look at this illustration of the process of registering for National Service under the Act.

CONSCRIPTION..... WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON ?

YOU ARE FACED WITH THESE CHOICES



Melbourne Draft Resisters' Union, *Downdraft: A Draft Resistance Manual*, Carlton, no date.

18 Here is what happened to eight 20 year old Australian males eligible for National Service. Using a different colour for each, trace the paths they would have taken on the diagram above.

- Ray Registered, balloted in, unfit
- Tony Registered, not balloted in
- Giulio Registered, balloted in, refused to attend
- Frank Registered, balloted in, conscientious objector
- Sam Registered, balloted in, deferred
- William Did not register
- Milos Registered, balloted in, refused to obey call up
- Peter Registered, balloted in, entered

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The *National Service Act* allowed conscientious objectors to avoid service.

19 Here are statements made by some young men who claimed exemption. Decide in each case if you think:

- they should have been accepted as conscientious objectors
- they would have been accepted as conscientious objectors.

a Peter Hornby, 1.10.69

Conscription denies the humanity and individuality of a human being. He becomes no more than the servant of the authority which conscripts. The authority of a government over an individual's life can under no circumstances be justified. It has no inherent divine right to conscript for military service, nor does democratic sanction legitimise such authority.

In going to gaol, I am following my conscience in the best way I can.

The way to resist this illegitimate authority is to refuse to be conscripted: by going underground to fight conscription, or by direct resistance to the army from within or without.

I will not allow myself to be conscripted by illegitimate authority. I urge each young man liable for conscription to act according to his conscience.

b Graham Mowbray 23.5.69

As a Christian and as I hope a thinking one, I am convinced that the example of the life of Christ demands pacifism as a tenet of Christian action.

Consequently, I reject the *National Service Act* and all for which it stands as wrong. It would be inconsistent to seek exemption only for myself and allow other men to be conscripted. I believe it is just as wrong for others to be compelled to do military service as it would be for myself. Thus special exemption for oneself under the provisions for conscientious objection would be wrong.

The only solution is the repeal of the Act.

c Stephen Townshend 12.5.69

I have refused to register for National Service.

I have a conscientious belief that the Vietnam War and conscription are wrong. Conscription is, I feel, unjustified in either case. The necessary measure of whether a war is worth fighting is whether people voluntarily enlist to fight it. The Vietnam War I see as the suppression by a powerful and enlightened force of a popular revolution. I could not escape a feeling of guilt and cowardice if I complied with directions to further these evils.

I tend increasingly to the view that wars between nations are not worth fighting.

I feel that wars within a nation, civil wars and revolutions, can bring about a change for the good. Therefore in some cases I would take up arms. I break the law regarding these matters without compunction. I do not care who introduced the law, a dictator or a democratically elected government. It will have my allegiance only if it is a just law.

Australian Union of Students, *Anti-Conscription Kit*, pp. 11–12

20 'I do not care who introduced the law, a dictator or a democratically elected government. It will have my allegiance only if it is a just law.' (Stephen Townshend)

Do you agree with this statement? Discuss some of its implications for a democratic society.

21 Go back to your grid at the start of this unit. Add any new key questions, and make any notes that will help you formulate your final interview questions.

22 The description of the system is based on a display in a museum. What other documents or information would you like to see in the display that might help people explore this issue?

Coming to a conclusion

23 Go back to your hypotheses about the Vietnam War based on the cartoon evidence. What changes, additions or omissions would you now make?

24 Do you think that the National Service system introduced during the Vietnam War was a fair and equitable one? Explain the reasons for your view.



Debating conscription today

Your task now is to create a set of arguments for or against conscription, and present them in the most effective way.

You will find that many of the key arguments today are pretty much the same as in the 1960s and 1970s, so your historical study will help you understand these issues and arguments.

One element that is very different however, is the gender issue. Conscriptionists would never even have considered the possibility of including women in the 1960s. Today, there is an automatic belief that both sexes should be treated equally. How does that affect the conscriptionist argument?

You can get some information about gender equality in the Australian Defence Force from an article in *STUDIES* 3/2002 – available in your school library.



“MUM!! WHERE DID YOU SPRING FROM?!!”

Rigby, *Daily Mirror*, 1966