CHAPTER THREE

'Australia's Picked Citizens': the RSL in the interwar years

> *The RSL would be one of the most conservative in nature of organisations ever in this country.*
>
> Bruce Ruxton[1]

Introduction

The RSL was, according to Stephen Garton, 'a complex institution, shaped as much from below as it was from above'.[2] This chapter demonstrates that the opposite was true. Although returned servicemen's organisations initially displayed distinct signs of disunity along class lines, during the early 1920s the RSL leadership took steps to isolate any radical elements from the organisation. Despite the hopes of many working class soldiers that the League would take up issues of poverty and unemployment, 'their' organisation became increasingly associated with conservative politics. Indeed, the League's members were expected to be 'reliable types', at all times ready to defend law and order, White Australia, the Empire and a rather slippery version of democracy and constitutional government. In the years after World War One, the RSL leadership managed to successfully unite significant numbers of returned men into loyalist forces opposed to domestic labour unrest. Contrary to the notion that the RSL worked in the interests of ex-servicemen, its leadership strove to contain working class returned soldier anger at government repatriation policies and to channel RSL members towards conservative electoral parties, at the expense of the Labor Party. Despite the rhetoric of battlefield friendships and protecting the memory of those who had been killed, the League's leadership was more concerned with the shape of Australia's national future than with the prosaic concerns of soldiers and their dependants. Instead, the purpose of

---

[1] *Warriors, Welfare and Eternal Vigilance: The History and Role of the Returned Services League*, produced and presented by Phillip Briant for ABC Radio and Documentaries, 1982. Tape held at the State Library of NSW.

the RSL was to direct returned soldiers away from Bolshevism, and towards nationalism.

The RSL's opposition to non-British immigration was part and parcel of its nationalist agenda. In a cross-class organisation dominated by a conservative leadership, the RSL sub-branches provided an important conduit for right-wing ideologies into the labour movement, and the working class more generally. The RSL's commitment to national chauvinism was at the core of its philosophy and it used the concept of 'race loyalty' to sow division within the working class as part of a wider anti-union agenda. Migrant workers were a crucial target in this battle. By encouraging hostility towards southern Europeans, the RSL leadership could feign concern about working class employment conditions, while promoting the White Australia policy. Such a strategy on the part of an elite-dominated organisation calls into question all previous historiographical assumptions that racist immigration policies were predominantly advocated by the working class, for the working class. This chapter focuses on the League's commitment to capitalist hegemony, employer clamour for 'free' and 'cheap' labour and RSL opposition to both working class militancy and 'racial admixture', on the grounds that these factors provide the context in which the RSL's effect on the interwar administration of the White Australia policy can be assessed.

'Digger Violence' – a pattern emerges

In 1915, wounded service personnel began returning to Australia.[3] Unlike the news of battle carnage and strategic blunders that had been zealously censored as 'prejudicial to recruiting', the return of wounded men was openly paraded for political purposes.[4] Those in charge of boosting recruitment numbers exploited these symbols of patriotism, bravery, suffering and sacrifice, because it was felt that the 'heroes of Suvla' would

[2] S. Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 56.
[3] The *Kyarra* was the first hospital ship to arrive in Australia from Egypt in February 1915. J. Duncan, The Origin, Aims, and Achievements of the R.S.L. in Western Australia, unpublished manuscript, 1961, copy held at Anzac House, Perth, p. 6.
[4] P. Cochrane, *Simpson and the Donkey*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1992, especially pp. 64, 74-81.

provide a potent stimulus to men who had, thus far, refused to volunteer for war service.[5] The conservative push to get young men to enlist was overwhelming. Many men decided to join the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in response to what White called 'public pressures and private guilts'. As he described it, a sense of urgency was 'manufactured by later recruiting campaigns, of shame and the departure of mates'.[6] Arthur Ponsonby argued that the 'weapon of falsehood' was employed wherever military conscription was not introduced. As enlistment was voluntary in Australia, pressmen were under particular pressure to present the war in a favourable, even sporting, light.[7] However, while the Fisher and Hughes Governments had promised a warm homecoming for those who had been prepared to bat for the Empire team, lack of administrative preparedness and the sheer enormity of the repatriation project meant that, beyond the welcoming faces at the wharves and the main street parades, many soldiers and sailors were met with a bureaucratic cold-shoulder upon their return.

Even in the rose-coloured view of Loftus Hills, the League's first official historian, 'the Defence Department [initially responsible for repatriation] could not stand up to the strain of unusual and unprecedented conditions'.[8] Upon demobilisation, many mentally and/or physically wounded ex-servicemen were unable to instantaneously resettle into their families, jobs and communities. Others perhaps felt that, having suffered an extraordinary degree of hardship, they were entitled to a period of rest. For these men, there was the prospect that insult would be added to their injuries, in the form of a rapid transition from being portrayed as 'our brave boys' to being labelled 'welfare dependent' or 'work-shy'.[9] Veterans who took up the oft-'poisoned chalice' of soldier settlement also experienced this paradoxical treatment.

---

[5] See David Day's description of Bathurst's 'Carnival for the Wounded', where men with head wounds and missing limbs were met at the station and 'paraded through the streets'. The local labour paper described the event as 'a pageant with a purpose'. D. Day, *Chifley*, HarperCollins, Pymble, 2001, p. 103.

[6] One soldier accurately described the fervour with which recruitment was undertaken. When asked why he had enlisted, he joked: '[t]o stop Billy Hughes from sending my sister'. R. White, 'Motives for joining up: self-sacrifice, self-interest and social class', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 9, October 1986, pp. 5, 10, 12.

[7] See J. F. Williams, *Anzacs, The Media and The Great War*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999, pp. 1-2, 74-87.

[8] L. Hills, *The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia: Its Origin, History, Achievements and Ideals*, Part 1, Southland, Melbourne, 1938, p. 14.

Schedvin argued that, by the end of the 1920s, soldier settlement schemes had failed 'almost completely', fixing the blame on bureaucrats who had placed ex-servicemen on poorly irrigated land to produce commodities for hostile export markets.[10] Indeed, in 1920, the Federal Executive of the RSL was so appalled at the administration of the land settlement scheme that it appealed to the Prime Minister for a Royal Commission.[11] Unsurprisingly perhaps, 'digger violence' erupted in many Australian cities and towns, expressing an anger partially fuelled by the poor performance of the Federal Government in relation to returned soldier welfare.[12]

Many authors have commented on the seriousness with which conservative sections of the community viewed the arrival of a potentially radicalised and organised force of trained military personnel.[13] Australian soldiers had a reputation for being flippant towards army discipline and had, on many occasions, engaged in mass disobedience.[14] According to Gammage, some Australian soldiers in Egypt, uncharacteristically ready to return to camp, 'would crowd onto a tram, toss off the driver, and career wildly at full speed through the darkened streets, some of them clinging boisterously to the sides and roof of the vehicle'.[15] C. E. W. Bean reported that some aggrieved Australian soldiers from the 1st Battalion took the announcement of their imminent departure for France as an opportunity to exact revenge on the inhabitants of the Haret el Wasser district for their 'unjust' supply of diseased

---

[9] Garton, *The Cost of War*, p. 87. See also W. A. Holman's belief that the public became tired of the demands of returned soldiers, 'mainly due to the stridency of a few loud-mouthed claimants'. 'Society: And the Digger', *Reveille*, 30 September 1929.

[10] C. B. Schedvin, *Australia and the Great Depression*, Oxford University Press, Sydney, 1988, p. 64.

[11] Letter, RSL Federal Executive to PM, dated 4 February 1920, NAA: A2487, 1920/6129.

[12] C. Lloyd and J. Rees, *The Last Shilling: A History of Repatriation in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 187.

[13] See, for example, F. Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1983, p. 39; White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 137; H. McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, George Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1984, p. 213; A. Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989, pp. 29-30.

[14] Several incidences occurred on ships taking Australian soldiers to the war. On one occasion, the men rioted over the price of fruit on board and, in Alexandria, defied orders not to go ashore. They used ropes to climb down to the pier, leaving only sixty men, from approximately two thousand, still on the ship. See B. Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975, pp. 34-35. See also Albert Jacka's reference to shipboard antics. His biographer cited a diary reference which noted that '[d]uring the day a lot of fun was caused by Major Steele chasing the troops who had broken ship. Sgt Maj Blainey was threatened with being thrown overboard for drawing and firing a revolver at a nigger plying a boat for hire.' I. Grant, *Jacka, VC Australia's Finest Fighting Soldier*, Sun Books, South Melbourne, 1990, p. 14.

[15] B. Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975, p. 36.

prostitutes and bad liquor. He detailed the rioters' methods, recounting that 'beds, mattresses and clothing from several houses were thrown out of the windows and piled in a bonfire in the street'.[16] Crowds of onlookers formed and the local fire brigade was roughly obstructed from extinguishing the fire.[17]

As war correspondent, and later, official historian, Bean did much to downplay this aspect of soldier behaviour. In *The Anzac Book*, which he edited in 1916, he carefully constructed an image of brave and upstanding heroism that was to become the mainstay of the Anzac legend.[18] However, as Kent has demonstrated, what Bean omitted from this publication was far more significant than that which he finally included.[19] One poem written by a soldier at Gallipoli had as its chief protagonist, Jim, a prodigious imbiber and boisterous defender of 'white superiority'. One stanza read:

> *And if he did knock out a policeman*
> *In Cairo, when full of the dope,*
> *By mistakin' the coon for Jack Johnson,*
> *And himself as the white man's Hope;*
> *And if he did let down the guard tent*
> *It didn't hurt anyone much,*
> *The things were just done in good nature,*
> *And should have been taken as such …*[20]

Given his decidedly less than mythic status, Jim was not permitted to stagger across Bean's pristine idealisation of the Anzac troops, meaning that his heroic death towards the end of the poem was all for nought. Just as revealing is the easy familiarity with racist attitudes that the author somewhat petulantly defended. Indeed, soldiers

[16] C. E. W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981 (first published 1921), p. 130.
[17] For a more detailed account of Bean's observations, see K. Fewster, 'The Wazza Riots, 1915', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 4, April 1984.
[18] C. E. W. Bean, *The Anzac Book*, Sun Books, South Melbourne, 1975 (first published 1916).
[19] Kent, 'The Anzac Book'. Winter pointed to some methodological weaknesses in Kent's article but did not, to my mind, challenge Kent's central assertion that Bean played an important role in sanitising and mythologising the Anzacs. D. Winter, 'The Anzac book: A re-appraisal', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 16, April 1990.
[20] D. A. Kent, 'The Anzac Book and the Anzac Legend: C. E. W. Bean as Editor and Image-Maker', *Historical Studies*, vol. 21, no. 84, April 1985, p. 384. Re the 1908 Burns-Johnson boxing match and its place in fuelling Jim's racial antagonism, see J. Wells, *Boxing Day: The Fight that Changed the World*, HarperCollins, Pymble, 1998.

identifying with 'Wazza-style' xenophobia were far more evident in the AIF than Bean's upstanding, rural, antipodean Heracles.[21]

Riotous behaviour also occurred in training camps before embarkation.[22] In addition, although hushed up to a large extent, Australian military authorities must have been aware of the post-war soldier strikes and demonstrations rapidly spreading through camps in Britain and France, as Allied troops grew impatient about demobilisation and refused to contemplate fighting against Bolshevik Russia. Indeed, Australian soldiers participated in some of these protests.[23] While in Cairo, homefront newspapers could portray these outbursts as part of the Australian soldier's cheery larrikinism, democratic impulses and 'natural' distaste for authority. On Australian soil, however, conservative opinion was far less willing to exhibit any such paternal tolerance.[24]

As a result of these many and varied outbursts, newspaper editorials exhibited a keen awareness of the soldiers' potential to become a powerful political force. Their ultimately unrealised fear was that Bolshevik propaganda would inspire a militant response from angry veterans who would be difficult to control. As an example of the trepidation with which the soldiers' mass return was viewed, one *Kalgoorlie Miner*

---

[21] J. Bourke, 'Swinging the lead': malingering, Australian soldiers, and the Great War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 26, April 1995. Bourke sympathetically details the evidence of malingering among Australian soldiers, a subject studiously avoided by proponents of the Anzac legend.

[22] See reports of riots at the Casula and Liverpool training camps in 1916. Soldiers protested against extended training hours by marching from camp, commandeering a train and, subsequently, raiding several city hotels for beer and spirits. NSW Premier, W. A. Holman, and Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, both argued that the trouble was caused by a small number of agitators who were under the influence, and in the pay, of German agents. However, other editorials argued that the Premier's 'enemy ringleader' explanation was unconvincing, that the soldiers had displayed the 'sheerest cowardice', and that more harsh penalties should be dealt out to the rioters. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 15, 16 February, 1916; *Sydney Morning Herald* [hereafter *SMH*], 15, 16 February, 1916. A subsequent NSW Premier, Jack Lang, claimed that prohibitionists used the riots to win early closing of hotels for the duration of the war. J. T. Lang, *I Remember*, Invincible Press, Sydney, no publication date, circa 1956, pp. 154-8.

[23] For a participant/observer account of these protests, see A. Rothstein, *The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919*, Macmillan Press, London, 1980.

[24] Soldiers from the Blackboy Camp, outside Perth, continually defied railway authority attempts to make them buy train tickets. As a result, it was planned that soldiers would only receive their leave pass after they had paid the appropriate rail fare. The resulting queue of soldiers became impatient and rushed the railway officials. The tickets were thrown in the air and so distributed to all the men. A compromise was reached whereby soldiers in uniform could travel for free, but would have one shilling deducted from their fortnightly pay to cover this 'concession'. On a far more serious note, on the evening of 20 January 1916 in Perth, soldiers who rioted against the migrant shopkeepers who ran late supper rooms, had to be dispersed by police. The journalist remarked that, unlike similar riots that had taken place on the previous

editorial expressed the hope that ex-servicemen would play a law-abiding role in post-war Australian society. Rhetorically, it asked whether 'men who took their part in restoring order to the world [were] likely to return to their own countries to assist in setting local order and authority at defiance?' The community could feel confident that 'they will be the last to do so', opined the editor. To be doubly assured, the paper reminded its readers that 'if there is one thing above others that the soldier learns it is respect for law and order'.[25] However, as noted above, returned soldiers were often not averse to taking 'direct action' upon their return.

Part of a concerted strategy to allay the potential threat of returned soldier militancy was the formation of returned servicemen's organisations to foster 'that spirit of comradeship which had been created in the camp and on the field'.[26] A large number of support groups mushroomed in the years after 1918, organised by unit personnel, soldiers' fathers and local philanthropists. Although receiving sustenance from many sections of the community, business and government sponsorship was fundamental to the continued survival of such organisations.[27] The most prominent and enduring of these groups was the Returned Soldiers' Association which, after a number of name changes, became what is known today as the Returned & Services League of Australia or, more simply, the RSL. This organisation quickly became pre-eminent among returned soldier groups. That it was viewed in this light by the Federal Government was demonstrated by a discussion between Prime Minister Hughes and members of the Repatriation Commission, where a question was raised regarding whether the RSL was truly representative of returned soldiers. Hughes dismissed this concern, saying that '[f]or all practical purposes the Returned Soldiers' Association has sufficient of the soldiers in it to make it representative.'[28] Kristianson concurred with this view, stating

---

New Year's Eve, this outburst could not be blamed on 'visiting Eastern States soldiers'. *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1, 21 January, 27, 29 July, 1916; 'A.I.F. Discipline', *Reveille*, 31 May 1929.

[25] *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 August 1919.

[26] Senior Chaplain Dean Talbot, NSW President of the RSL, 1917, cited in P. Sekuless and J. Rees, *Lest We Forget: The History of the Returned Services League 1916-1986*, Rigby, Dee Why West, 1986, p. 22.

[27] Garton, *The Cost of War*, p. 75; Lloyd and Rees, *The Last Shilling*, pp. 24-30, 56-7, 151.

[28] Transcript of discussion between Prime Minister and Repatriation Commissioners relating to the Creation of a paid Commission on which the Returned Soldiers' Association would have a representative, dated 9 October 1919, NAA: A1606/1, D11/1.

that, by 1919, the RSL held 'an undisputed position as Australia's major ex-service body'.[29]

Ostensibly, the RSL was formed to assist ex-service personnel upon their return to Australia. In the eyes of early proponents, its most important function was to provide a means by which the ideals and traditions of the AIF could be reproduced in civilian life, in order to accrue positive benefits for the cohesion of post-war Australian society. Yet, despite a very respectable veneer, the RSL leadership was not always able to resolve the tension between respectability and the appetite for direct action felt by many members.[30] Nor, as this thesis will argue, did the leadership necessarily want to quell its more extreme members, especially in relation to their determined opposition to non-British migration. Certainly, RSL officials wished it to appear as if their disapproval of violence and rioting was absolute and their close relationship with the Hughes Government was based on a reciprocal arrangement, whereby the League was granted official recognition in return for keeping returned soldiers under control.[31] Any sign that they supported the tactics of 'direct action' might irreparably damage their standing in government circles. Nevertheless, as will become clear in later chapters, sections of the RSL did engage in what Evans called 'establishment violence'; action that 'flaunts the rules ostensibly to defend them'.[32]

Moore's definition of right-wing organisations is extremely pertinent to an understanding of the RSL. In his view, such organisations have four principal characteristics – a more extreme version of mainstream conservative positions, a defined 'enemy' that can be used to galvanise organisation, a dual commitment to national chauvinism and oft-linked xenophobia and racism, and a cynicism towards parliamentary democracy.[33] Throughout its history, the RSL has displayed all four of

[29] G. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, p. 23.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 13.
[31] M. Lake, 'The power of Anzac' in M. McKernan and M. Browne, *Australia: Two Centuries of War & Peace*, Australian War Memorial/Allen & Unwin, Canberra, 1988, p. 206.
[32] R. Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 1.
[33] A. Moore, *The Right Road? A History of Right-Wing Politics in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 2-4.

these interrelated features and has been a powerful lobbying force for right-wing policies, both in government circles and in the wider community.[34] To understand its conservative policies and practices, it is important to establish how, and on what basis, the RSL was formed. From this foundation, the influence of the national organisation on 'grassroots' activities in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill can be analysed, with a particular focus on the activities of working class returned soldiers who provided a link between the RSL leadership and the wider working class.

The RSL: what it was to become

The RSL was formed in Melbourne in 1916, after a meeting of various state-based associations of returned soldiers. Superficially, the justification used for the creation of a national organisation was that the issues facing returned soldiers were of a federal nature and could not be handled effectively by disparate groups. The resulting Federal Executive of the RSL was to be primarily responsible for lobbying the Federal Government about the need for adequate provisions for returned service personnel. During the war, the Government was anxious about its reputation for looking after those men who had already returned, fearing that to offer poor care would affect recruitment. An open-door policy to 'loyal' returned soldier officials was generally applied.[35] However, the RSL's programme embraced far more than the mere practicalities of repatriation. Even the League's stated objectives gave a clear indication of the organisation's intended role in post-war Australian society, frequently returning to the theme of unremitting soldier service to the nation. Loftus Hills maintained that the organisation was formed to foster the friendships, memories and traditions generated by war service and to promote returned servicemen as paragons 'of public spirit and noble-hearted endeavour'.[36] It was hoped that, through the League, returned soldiers could be more easily moulded into model citizens and active mouthpieces of patriotic sentiments. In addition, the RSL would oversee the proper memorialising of those who had served,

[34] Sekuless and Rees, *Lest We Forget*, p. ix-x.
[35] Lake, 'The power of Anzac', p. 206.
[36] Hills, *The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia*, p. 11.

preserving their reputation and providing assistance to those who required financial, medical, housing or employment aid.

In addition to the wounded men who had already returned, there were 167,000 men overseas at the end of the war.[37] Membership of the RSL ballooned in 1918-19 as these men arrived back in Australia, with an estimated 150,000 returned servicemen joining by the end of 1919.[38] It was argued that war service would gather 'Australia's sons together in an unbreakable bond of comradeship'.[39] However, the bond did not prove to be as strong as some might have hoped, as only one year later, membership had fallen to around 50,000. By 1924, membership had dropped to 24,000 which was less than nine per cent of those eligible to join.[40] Kristianson attributed this decline to the ten shilling membership fee, an imposition beyond the means of many prospective members. He also felt that the conservative politics of the leadership alienated many more left-wing soldiers.[41] Lake cited work reasons and a more general desire among some men to put the war behind them. She also detailed the way RSL membership drives were carried out during and immediately after the war, where RSL recruiters were permitted to work on troop ships, on wharves where the ships docked and on long distance trains carrying soldiers to their home towns. Such concessions virtually assured a strong sign-up rate among the concentrated wave of returnees, but did not guarantee that soldiers were committed to the RSL in the longer term, many simply letting their membership lapse in subsequent years.[42] Nevertheless, from 1929, membership levels began to increase and, by 1933, had risen to 50,000 and continued to swell, reaching 82,000 nationally by 1939.[43] This would suggest that the cost of dues alone was not a significant factor in membership decline in the 1920s if, during the Depression, an increasing number of veterans were able to pay the membership fee. It is likely that the economic downturn, coupled with government attacks on pensions, made RSL

[37] Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 26.
[38] See Appendix A re RSL membership levels.
[39] Hills, *The Returned Sailors & Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia*, p. 9.
[40] Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 36.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 37. See also A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 125.
[42] Lake, 'The power of Anzac', pp. 204, 212.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

membership more attractive to some returned servicemen.[44] Public outbursts about employment preference and the level of pensions may have improved the profile of the RSL amongst potential recruits, and perhaps encouraged many to believe, mistakenly as it turned out, that the RSL would be a useful ally in harsh economic times.[45]

An essential part of the RSL project was to organise clubs for returned servicemen where they could socialise, receive information and produce literature promoting the advancement of the League. Formation of soldier clubs was given a high priority in many towns, where local burghers feared soldier demonstrations and were anxious to get soldiers off the streets. As later chapters in this study show, elite support was vital to the survival of returned soldier clubs. In both Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill, the mine manager employer associations provided accommodation for meeting places and the local well-to-do were prominent organisers. As Thomson argued, 'sub-branches offered carefully controlled meeting places as an alternative to the more threatening gatherings of returned men in pubs and on street corners'.[46] These sub-branches, in suburbs, townships and workplaces throughout the country, were at the base of the RSL's structure. By 1930, the NSW State Secretary could write that '[t]he backbone of the League is its sub-branches, and the very life of the sub-branches is the keen enthusiastic returned soldier member.'[47] Ernest Scott reported that, by 1935, there were 1,171 active sub-branches and 70,900 financial RSL members.[48]

These clubs linked a distant and often socially-removed Executive with the wider community. From the sub-branches, delegates were elected to attend an annual State Congress where motions on local matters were discussed and voted on. From the State Branch, two delegates were chosen to attend the annual Federal Congress, the

[44] The Kalgoorlie RSL made frequent complaints about returned soldiers who were not active in the League, but who called on it to help out during times of sickness and unemployment. See Chapter Four.
[45] The RSL ran a 'Hands Off Pensions' campaign, arguing that '[w]e are confident, despite vague misgivings, that pensions will remain inviolate.' See *Reveille*, 30 September 1929, 30 August 1930, 30 June 1931.
[46] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 123.
[47] *Reveille*, 31 March 1930.
[48] E. Scott, *Australia During the War*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936, p. 856.

controlling body of the RSL.[49] It was in this forum that decisions were made about RSL responses to Federal government activities, particularly in the area of returned soldier welfare but, contrary to appearances, democratic decision-making structures were not the League's strong point. Federal Congress met annually, but was limited to two delegates from each State branch. Annual Congresses at State level were delegated meetings, where a single delegate would usually represent a large number of members. In Western Australia, for example, delegates attended State Congress at a ratio of one per 100 members.[50]

Shortly after the war, it became obvious that the vast majority of eligible men would not play an active role in returned soldier politics. As early as January 1921, delegates to the South Australian branch's annual general meeting were complaining of widespread member apathy, and the need to deal with the problem of declining interest in League affairs.[51] At the 1922 Federal Congress, the RSL President, Gilbert Dyett, gave an opening address that characterised returned soldiers as 'ungrateful'. He said that Australia had a comparatively good record in the treatment of returned soldiers, but the men had 'failed to appreciate what has been done for them'.[52] Dyett's speech also gave a clear indication that the RSL leadership saw itself as an economic and political emissary of the Federal Government. In discussions with a delegation from the RSL, Prime Minister Hughes indicated that he was worried about the sheer enormity of the dissatisfaction with the repatriation process, claiming that he daily received 250 letters on the subject. It was, he argued, an anger that he could not afford. With an election looming that most commentators predicted would be a 'hard fight', he was aware that returned soldier votes were crucial role to success at the ballot box. Part of his strategy to deflect criticism from his Government's performance in this area was to court the

[49] Hills, *The Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia*, p. 12. Before 1921, five delegates had been chosen, but the expense of sending them interstate became too onerous. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 110.
[50] *The W. A. Digger Book*, compiled by the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League (W. A. Branch), Perth, 1929, pp. 20-1.
[51] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 January 1921.
[52] *Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 1922, clipping held in Department of Repatriation file, NAA: A2487, 1922/11616.

RSL about a reconstituted Repatriation Commission of paid officials – the sop being that the RSL would have a greater level of representation.[53]

Smith's Weekly ran a vitriolic campaign against members of what had been named the 'Cyanide Gang' – the Repatriation Commission – for failing to adequately provide for soldiers and their dependants. As one of the members of the three-person Commission was a former president of the NSW branch of the RSL, namely Chaplain-Captain Ashley Teece, the paper maintained that the RSL must either attack the Commission or stand accused of neglecting those for whom they were meant to provide. *Smith's* editorial maintained:

> [I]f Teece does not repudiate the other two [Commission members], and the League condones his silence, both Teece and the League will be in the position of taking money for work which they are not doing. The League is taking subscriptions from Diggers on the representation that it is protecting the interests of Diggers and their dependants. Teece is drawing an annual salary of £1250 … common decency … demands that both Teece and the League should justify the receipt of these moneys.[54]

Ignoring such attacks, League officials promoted the RSL in terms of its bureaucratic achievements. Dyett, for instance, remarked that the RSL's 'prestige and dignity was respected in every place of authority in Australia', suggesting that criticisms from 'below' were unfair and that the leadership was not being given credit for achieving such access to higher echelons. Rumblings in League journals and defensive comments by League officials suggest that many returned soldiers were of the view that the RSL leadership had priorities beyond practical welfare issues. Indeed, the evidence suggests that, in the interests of national unity, a primary function of the League was to contain the anger of returned servicemen and their dependants regarding the inadequacies of welfare provisions. Dyett revealed that, in making representations on behalf of its constituents, the League's leadership 'eliminated all representations that seemed unreasonable' and, by this method, maintained the RSL's reputation for

[53] Returned Soldiers' Conferences with Prime Minister, transcript of meeting, 9 October 1919, NAA: A1606/1, D11/1.
[54] *Smith's Weekly*, 16 April 1921.

temperate dealings with the authorities.[55] When pension entitlements to many dependants of returned soldiers were cut in 1931, the RSL was prepared to couch this defeat in terms of a willing sacrifice for the good of the nation. Indeed, as Lloyd and Rees have argued, returned soldier organisations participated in instituting the reductions by cooperating with the government on the conception of an 'acceptable' plan.[56] One RSL journal argued:

> The surrender of our soldier[s] to a cut in pension again affords proof of their readiness, in National emergency, to give a lead where others waver. In peace, as it was in war, the soldier bears the greatest burden of sacrifice … The voluntary contribution of the soldiers, from their meagre pensions, towards the financial rehabilitation of their country, brings into bold relief the selfish and mercenary spirit which has animated some other sections of our community.[57]

When the RSL was criticised by members for capitulating to the Federal Government, its leaders argued that its concessions had prevented a worse outcome and that there had been no alternative when 'The Ship of State was threatened with wreckage on the Financial Rocks'. They attacked what they called 'the stand and deliver weapon', advocated by some in the movement, arguing that a militant approach would 'only antagonise and fail'.[58]

Such attitudes cemented the relationship between the Federal Government and the RSL leadership. It could not, however, silence the critics who believed, with some justification, that working class returned soldiers were being systematically neglected. The Department of Repatriation kept a file containing reports of those who were dissatisfied with its inadequate ministrations. One of the Repatriation Department's clerks made a detailed report of the grievances that had been aired at a large meeting held at the Sydney Town Hall. Speakers complained that funds had been distributed unevenly and that some training schemes were leading men 'into blind alleys' where

[55] *Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 1922, clipping held in Department of Repatriation file, NAA: A2487, 1922/11616.
[56] The plan 'applied a statutory reduction of 22.5 per cent in the pensions payable to parents, children, and wives of returned soldiers, brothers and sisters of deceased members, and certain other classes of dependants'. See Lloyd and Rees, *The Last Shilling*, pp. 245-8
[57] *Reveille*, 31 August 1931.
[58] *Reveille*, 30 September 1931.

there were no prospects for employment. They also felt that job preference schemes that included the phrase 'all things being equal' were 'sheer humbug', if soldiers' disabilities could still prevent them from gaining employment. In a chilling precursor to Nazi ideology, one right-wing populist 'advocated the deportation of all interned aliens, and the confiscation of their property in Australia for repatriation purposes'.[59]

At another meeting in Dubbo, called by the Mayor in response to repeated local calls for the Government to deal with repatriation issues, one soldier remarked that 'the dilatory methods of officials were disgusting'. Another related that on the way home from the war:

> literature was circulated amongst the men on shipboard inducing them to believe that millions of money would be spent in their interests, and as soon as they received their discharge they would walk into prosperity. Forms were handed to the men on the boat on which they were asked to state what work they had been doing before the war, and what they wished to do on return. Since he had come back he had never met a man who could tell him what became of those forms.[60]

While the Federal Executive of the RSL would, on occasion, mobilise some of this anger to boost its bargaining position *vis-a-vis* the Federal Government, meetings and lobbying were the only openly-endorsed activities.[61]

As a lobbying group, the RSL constantly reminded the community of the debt owed by Australian society to returned servicemen. Indeed, it argued that the Australian people were only able to bask in the benefits of freedom and democracy because of the sacrifices that had been made by the AIF. Nevertheless, soldiers were repeatedly told their battle had only just begun. As one headline proclaimed, RSL members were 'Australia's Picked Citizens', a body of men with an important role to play in post-war society.[62] At a League Congress in Brisbane in 1921, in the presence of 'a large number of distinguished soldiers and citizens', the State Governor was asked to speak on one of

[59] Transcript of meeting at Sydney Town Hall on 8 December 1918 by Mr E. S. Smith. NAA: A2483, B18/7880.
[60] For report of this meeting, see *Sunday Times*, 15 December 1918.
[61] Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 33.
[62] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 August 1921.

the aims of the League. His Excellency chose to elaborate on the clause that exhorted members 'as citizens, to serve Australia with that spirit of self-sacrifice and loyalty with which our sailors and soldiers served Australia and the Empire in the war'.[63] His remedies for the country's economic woes were thrift, hard work and clean living. Speaking of the unnecessary divide between employers and employees, he blamed such rifts on the work of a minority of disaffected wasters. What was required, and what RSL members could provide, he argued, was:

> a rather more sturdy public opinion, which would keep them in the paths of healthy progress, and which would nullify the powers of those who, by the promulgation of revolutionary ideas, not unassisted by the demoralisation of gambling and drink, were endeavouring to pull down the fabric of our institutions and to sap the growth of our morality, with some idea that they might do better under a new order of things that they lacked the capacity to visualise or to explain.[64]

The RSL leadership was acutely aware that any attempt to galvanise a constituency with diverse class backgrounds and political orientations presented them with a number of problems. While, on occasion, military service created a shared sense of identity among some of those who fought, questions of socialism, temperance, religion and race, amongst others, remained a potential source of division within the RSL's dominion. Generally, RSL leaders tried to avoid mention of difficult issues, instead concentrating on political ideals that were seen as universally supported, such as the welfare of returned service personnel and the extension of patriotic service and imperial loyalty on the home front.[65] In particular, they continually eschewed involvement in party politics, while claiming the right to criticise any party that espoused principles contrary to the interests of returned soldiers. Kristianson concluded that the League's reluctance to form a returned soldier party, or to openly support the conservative side of politics, reflected a desire to avoid involvement in the political fall-out from the Labor split and an attendant belief that the concerns of ex-veterans should

[63] See Hills, *The Returned Sailors & Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia,* p. 11.
[64] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 August 1921.
[65] One of the principal aims of the newly-formed Returned Sailors and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia was 'to inculcate loyalty to Australia and the Empire and secure patriotic service in the interests of both'. Hills, *The Returned Sailors & Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia,* p. 11.

be above sectional interests.[66] Thomson also cited the RSL's aspiration to be an influential lobbying group, regardless of whether Labor or conservative governments were in power.[67] In order to steer clear of possible political disagreements between members and governments, the South Australian RSL leadership confirmed that politics would be barred from official publications 'as vigorously as one would the plague'.[68] On the surface, this led to open flattery of all governments, regardless of political hue. The RSL leadership in New South Wales argued that:

> In general, the vicissitudes of party government leave the League indifferent and untroubled. It has no concern in whether a Government stays or goes. All governments, irrespective of party, have been generous on the whole in their recognition of the splendid work of the League, and have given material help towards its advancement.[69]

While they were prepared to work with Labor governments, preference for the Nationalists was barely disguised. However, the most important part of any explanation of the RSL's 'non-political' stance is Lake's view that it proscribed members of the RSL from supporting labour movement disputes. The 'mateship' of the trenches and the perceived egalitarianism of the AIF were ideologically counterposed to the nasty divisiveness of trade union campaigns for better wages and conditions. In 1919, when the labour movement was on the move to recoup some of its wartime losses, the RSL leadership attempted to divert returned soldiers from supporting those campaigns.

The RSL leadership's public protestations of an 'apolitical' stance were more akin to a wolf donning sheep's clothing. While attempting to quarantine members from infectious radical influences, the outwardly 'non-party' face adopted by the League did not limit its leaders' ability to intervene in the political sphere. Because of their self-proclaimed special status as defenders of the Australian way of life, they frequently offered opinions on issues of 'national importance'. Their conservative stance on issues such as immigration, defence, education, family life and labour questions was forcefully

---

[66] Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 6.
[67] Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 121.
[68] *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 January 1921. South Australian RSL publications have been examined, because, in this period, the Broken Hill RSL was a sub-branch of the South Australian branch. This reflects the geographic and cultural links that Broken Hill residents maintained with Adelaide, rather than Sydney.
[69] *Reveille*, 30 September 1929.

outlined in League journals and promulgated through the media, public speaking engagements and written communications. Below this veneer, however, working class disaffection could not be helped. Protestations of political neutrality could not mask the fact that League officials were publicly committed to a 'do-or-die' battle against Communism, an ideology that they inextricably linked with Labor and union politics.[70] To this end, countless League journal editorials championed the Nationalist and Liberal sides of politics, whose policies the leadership commonly shared. As will be demonstrated in the case study chapters, the Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill sub-branches were focal points for anti-Labor election campaigns. During election campaigns, RSL activities galvanised support for anti-Labor candidates and, in the process, identified and weeded out intractable 'red-raggers' and 'malcontents' that the League leadership felt better off without.

Beyond the question of party political allegiances, the RSL purportedly refrained from interference in the industrial sphere in deference to its working class membership. One editorial in the *Diggers' Gazette* stated:

> There is a division, but there is no definite line, between what the League may, and should, touch industrially and what it should not. That is one of our danger spots, one of the matters on which we must be particularly careful. We must run no danger of a split.[71]

Despite such protestations, the RSL leadership actively organised against labour movement militancy. As later chapters will demonstrate, RSL officials organised strike breakers, spoke vehemently against industrial action and repeatedly prioritised national and business interests over the welfare of working class people, even those who were RSL members. For example, during the waterfront dispute in Port Adelaide, Nationalist, pastoralist and prominent RSL patron, Camillus Sinclair Wood, organised a small party of strikebreakers from Broken Hill.[72] It did not take long for labour movement activists to realise that the RSL was not simply a benign protector of returned men, but an

[70] K. Richmond, 'Reaction to Radicalism: Non-Labour Movements, 1920-9', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 5, November 1979, p. 52.
[71] *Diggers' Gazette*, 15 July 1920.
[72] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 4 October 1928.

industrial enemy. For their part, RSL stalwarts viewed even the mildest forms of industrial action as 'disloyal' and closely akin to Bolshevism.

While the RSL's role in the class struggle of the immediate post-war period is a thesis topic in itself, the following case illustrates many of the industrial tensions of the interwar years. In July 1920, L. E. Hansford contacted the League's South Australian branch for advice on his industrial situation and whether he should take a ticket in another 'union', besides the RSL. He was working at Jervois Swamp and had been asked to take an AWU ticket. When he refused to do so and added that he was already in the RSL, he was told that the RSL was not a union and would not fight for wages. The AWU members thereafter refused to work with Hansford as a non-unionist. The *Gazette* informed him that the RSL was not an industrial body and that it could not advise members whether to join a union or not, but that the matter would be discussed at the next Council meeting.[73] A delegate to this meeting remarked that, if they were to depart from their policy of non-partisanship in industrial matters, 'it might mean the end of the League'. However, in the same article, it was pointed out that returned servicemen were not gaining employment preference in a number of areas throughout the State and that there was currently an attempt to oust returned soldiers from the stevedoring industry, where they were being employed in preference to unionised labour.[74] The Council resolved to ask the Federal Executive to use its influence to press for employment preference provisions to be included in the Industrial Peace Bill.[75]

In order to disguise their anti-working class agenda, League officials portrayed their industrial stance as one of opposition only to the menacing, radical, and therefore 'foreign', minority. In January 1921, the President of the South Australian RSL delivered an emotive address that warned of revolutionaries who had 'succeeded in worming themselves into the trade unions, with the intention of propagating their

[73] *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 July 1920.
[74] G. T. Powell, Uncertain Frontiers: A Study of the Waterside Workers' Federation in South Australia 1917-1922, unpublished BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1966. See also E. I. Curnow, Shall We Strike: An account of the 1928 strike struggle of the Waterside Workers in Port Adelaide, unpublished BA (Hons) thesis, University of Adelaide, 1958.
[75] *Diggers' Gazette*, 1 October 1920. Re the *Industrial Peace Act (1920)*, see L. F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914-1952*, Angus and Robertson, London, 1979, pp. 444-5, 451-2, 550-1.

insidious teachings amongst loyal workmen, and eventually disrupting our Empire'.[76] Again, the South Australian RSL leadership expressed its determination not to step on the toes of the labour movement, declaring its intention to abstain from participation in any industrial dispute. However, their 'guarantee' contained the proviso that they would maintain this position only while industrial disputes were conducted 'along constitutional lines'.[77]

This 'foot in both camps' approach was by no means universally effective, particularly since many returned soldiers perceived the leadership to be dominated by members of society's elite. For instance, the *Gazette* publicly criticised one digger who had failed to pay his dues to the RSL on the grounds that he was not going to pay his subscription 'so long as a member of the State Board draws a big screw out of the League'.[78] A similar case was reported in Sydney. On a hospital visit, Charlie Wilson, a member of the NSW State Executive, gently prompted one patient to become a member of the RSL. 'Me join; no, not on your life – at least, not while all you 'brass hats' are running the executive' was the reply. The author pointed out that, at the time, none of the NSW Executive had been officers. Nevertheless, no doubt inspired by the League's political orientation and by the members of the establishment that it openly courted, many of the RSL's rank-and-file felt that it was dominated by ex-officers.[79] In 1921, a column in the *Gazette* attempted to counter criticism from 'inside and outside the League' that its leadership was an 'officer caste', by taking umbrage at the implied suggestion that an officer was not a real Digger. The author whined:

> Not only in this State, but elsewhere, is the accusation made that the League is run by "brass hats" ... It can be taken as granted that those who attempt to 'throw off' at the so-called "officer caste" were unable to receive promotion themselves.[80]

In 1928, Colonel Collett, President of the Western Australian State branch, remarked that he had made enquiries regarding charges of elitism within the RSL. He found that

[76] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 January 1921.
[77] *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 April 1921.
[78] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 July 1921.
[79] *Reveille*, 30 April 1929.
[80] *Diggers' Gazette*, 7 April 1921.

there was 'a good deal of prejudice' amongst the general membership towards the presence of officers in the RSL leadership. In reply, he stated that promotion within the AIF had been distinctly merit-based. He said that the 'great majority of officers … were promoted from the ranks, not because of social status or claims, but because they were good soldiers'.[81]

In trying to weld together the interests of the 'brass hats' and the working class returned soldier, the RSL was attempting to reproduce largely invented battlefield relations – class collaboration and deference to leadership. Robson has demonstrated that, although the vast majority of World War One personnel were of working class origin, very few men from labouring and mining occupations became officers. The AIF leadership, according to his survey, was overwhelmingly Protestant and primarily drawn from a narrow range of occupations – 'commerce, clerical, professional and pre-war army'.[82] Even a cursory glance at the list of the RSL's most prominent leaders demonstrates that the officer caste were disproportionately represented.[83] In short, those who attained commissions were far more likely to gain a leadership position in the RSL.[84] In later chapters of this thesis, evidence will be provided of a similar trend at the local level. Although 'brass hats' were far more numerous in the Federal echelon, the leadership of the local sub-branches in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill, particularly after the radical element had been isolated, displayed a distinctly middle class character.[85]

---

[81] Presidential speech to the Western Australian State Congress, reported in *Reveille,* 31 October 1928.

[82] L. L. Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First A.I.F., 1914-1918: Some Statistical Evidence', *Historical Studies,* vol. 15, no. 61, October 1973, pp. 748-9. See also J. McQuilton, 'Enlistment for the First World War in rural Australia: the case of north-eastern Victoria, 1914-1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial,* no. 33, 2000 and *Rural Australians and the Great War,* Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2001.

[83] For example, see list of Federal office holders in Sekuless and Rees, *Lest We Forget,* p. 228.

[84] In 1931, *Reveille* published a 'who's who' of Federal congress delegates. Of the nineteen men listed, eleven were officers. Among those whose rank was not mentioned were a barrister, a chairman of directors, and a statistician. The descriptions of the other five men did not indicate rank or occupation. *Reveille,* 30 November 1931.

[85] Recent work by Augustine has attempted to cast doubt on perceptions of an officer-dominated RSL. However, his argument relied on a tiny number of working class soldiers who gained positions in the Victorian State Branch over a very short and early period. While there is no doubt that officer-domination was less conspicuous at the branch and sub-branch level, and that some sub-branches were not cast in the Federal RSL's conservative image, this is certainly a case where the exception does not prove the rule. See L. Augustine, Guardians of the ANZAC Legend: A history of the RSL (Australian Returned Service League) Victorian Branch 1915-1923, http://ehistory.freeservers.com, accessed 22 January 2003.

Every time the RSL leadership performed public duties, their elitist sympathies were clearly apparent as 'brass hats' were paraded and eulogized. In 1921, *Smith's Weekly* drew readers' attention to an Anzac Day ceremony, organised by the NSW Branch of the RSL and held at the Sydney Town Hall. According to one description, it was all 'glitter and brilliance' inside the venue. While high-ranking officers spoke from the platform, outside a vast crowd of people gathered who had not been able to gain entrance for want of tickets. The *Daily Telegraph* described their bitter resentment, reporting that 'there were mothers and wives of dead men, exasperated to the point of tears. There were Anzacs, a lot angrier than they were on Anzac morning.'[86] Far from promoting the League to working class soldiers, events such as these served as catalysts for criticism of Australia and the League as riven with class inequality. In response, the RSL leadership frequently used League journals to promote a different view. For example, in 1921, the editor of the *Diggers' Gazette*, H. V. Millington, questioned whether there was, as Labor claimed, a division of society into two distinct classes – capital and labour. In his view, most capitalists were indistinguishable from working men. 'The majority of so-called working men are actually capitalists', he argued, because most had some savings in the bank or had sometimes won money gambling on the races, through which they obtained an 'unearned increment'. Similarly, he maintained, the capitalist may work twelve hours per day running industry and was entitled to be considered a working man. Millington was clearly trying to convince left-leaning members to reconsider their allegiance to the labour movement, to accept capitalists as their much-needed allies and to discourage working class members from the view that class position commonly determines life chances.[87] Particularly when the League's policies were inimical to working class living conditions, RSL leaders had to tread very lightly and outlandish political contortions were necessary to convince working class ex-soldiers that a healthy capitalism was what they had risked their lives to defend. In 1921, the *Gazette* warned RSL members who had hoped to receive a pay rise that it was going to be necessary for workers to tighten their belts in the interest of the economy. Deflecting anger onto a minority of employers who were 'avaricious

[86] Cited in *Smith's Weekly*, 30 April 1921.
[87] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 August 1921.

skinflints', the *Gazette* expressed the belief that the government's promotion of wage restraint would deliver long-term advantages that were in the national interest.[88]

Promotion of returned soldier employment preference was couched in similar terms. Veterans were encouraged to believe that opposition to conscription had betrayed those who fought, even though members of the AIF had themselves twice voted against compulsory service.[89] In the battle for employment in the post-war period, it was frequently stated by League officials that 'cowards', 'stay-at-homes', 'shirkers', and worst still, 'foreigners', had been able to take jobs that rightfully belonged to the returning men. Such an outlook encouraged working class soldiers to view those 'less deserving' workers as their main enemy, rather than the employer who had not kept a job open or who was unwilling to employ a wounded man. The RSL acted as an employment bureau for unemployed returned soldiers and, during the 1930s Depression, it was condemned for not doing enough to defend preferential treatment for its members. In one attempt to deflect such criticism, the League advised that long-term unemployed ex-soldiers, who were still suffering from a disability as a result of war service, were generally unsuitable employees. Instead of championing the right of the wounded to an appropriate job, one employment officer made it clear that the RSL leadership had to give its primary loyalty to the employers. He wrote that it was 'obvious that the employers' interest has to be most carefully safeguarded by sending out the man deemed to be most suitable to the job, and not necessarily the one next in order of registration'.[90]

While the RSL displayed a variety of elitist practices, this should not suggest that working class soldiers were not able to play a prominent part in the League – they were, as long as their attitudes were politically conservative. According to Garton, sub-branch meetings generated a sense of power and influence, emanating from the process of debating motions on a wide range of political topics.[91] Successful resolutions would be forwarded to the relevant government department or to the Federal Executive, with a

[88] *Diggers' Gazette*, 21 July 1921.
[89] Gammage, *The Broken Years*, p. 172.
[90] K. W. Mackenzie, 'Unemployment and the Returned Soldier', *Reveille*, 31 December 1929.
[91] Garton, *The Cost of War*, p. 56.

reply almost certainly forthcoming. In this way, the League's leadership could prevent genuine challenges to its national political programme. While many in the League leadership would surely have recognised the limited efficacy of such motions on government policy, the process of debating and passing resolutions at sub-branch level provided an invaluable semblance of democracy and a sense of inclusion for working class veterans. The debates were also a useful device for sub-branch leaders, in that they promoted conservative politics and trained rank and file members how to prosecute such arguments. In August, 1927, at the monthly general meeting of the Broken Hill RSL, the eighty members present debated a motion regarding future policies on conscription, much like members were then doing elsewhere around the country. The controversy centred around whether, in the event of another war, the government should be empowered to conscript wealth as well as manpower. The Broken Hill sub-branch resolved that government control of wealth was essential for the prevention of profiteering.[92] The response of the RSL's mine-owning benefactors to this resolution is not recorded, but motions like these helped to sustain the loyalty of working class members while posing little threat to the *status quo*. Yet such moves did not entirely prevent dissatisfaction with the RSL's lack of practical initiatives to address the financial stress suffered by many working class returned soldiers. At an RSL smoke social at the height of the Depression, the President of the Broken Hill sub-branch, remarked on distinguished Anzacs, such as Sir John Monash, Sir Arthur Onslow and Captain Jacka VC, who had died in the preceding year. Clearly unimpressed, a voice from the crowd was reported to have called out, 'If we don't get a job, we'll all die.'[93]

For those working class soldiers who could prove they were cast in the appropriate political mould, RSL membership offered the potential for a certain degree of upward social mobility. At least socially, working class returned soldiers were able to mix with people outside their milieu. Albert Jacka was undoubtedly one of the most prominent examples of this process, gaining both greater social prestige and a replacement political ideology to match his elevated position. From a rural working-

[92] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 31 August 1927. See also Humphrey McQueen's discussion of the links between anti-profiteering and anti-Bolshevism in 'Shoot the Bolshevik! Hang the Profiteer! Reconstructing Australian Capitalism, 1918-21' in E. L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 2, Australia & New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1978.

class background, Jacka had seen enlistment as a chance for advancement based on merit. Upon his return to Australia, Jacka went into business. He later became the mayor of St Kilda and was active in philanthropic activities. There is evidence to suggest that Jacka, like most AIF members, was opposed to conscription while on active service, but became a pro-conscriptionist upon his return to civilian life. Powell ascribed this change to a desire to avoid controversy.[94] However, in all likelihood, Jacka's membership of the staunchly pro-conscriptionist RSL had a far greater influence on his post-war attitudes. Previously a shy and socially ill-equipped man, Jacka's biographer attributed his post-war 'public confidence' to a keen participation in RSL activities.[95] Jacka's example also demonstrates that upward social mobility was not always permanent. Failed business dealings with the notorious John Wren resulted in his return to an impoverished working class existence as a travelling salesman, and a premature death.[96]

Had RSL propaganda remained within the closed doors of local sub-branch meetings, it would have had little effect on post-war society. However, one of the main purposes of such meetings was to groom cadre for the propagation of conservative ideology in the wider community. As the Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill case studies herein show, local sub-branches of the RSL played a crucial role in the distribution of such propaganda and those who refused to recite the official RSL 'line' were excluded. Oral historian, Alistair Thomson, recalled an interview with a returned soldier – one of only two Anzacs left in his town – who, even in the 1980s, was denied a public platform on

---

[93] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 25 April 1932.
[94] D. Powell, 'Albert Jacka VC and the 1916 Conscription Debate', *La Trobe Journal*, no. 63, Autumn 1999, pp. 31-5.
[95] Grant, *Jacka, VC*, pp. 164-180.
[96] Social mobility in the 1920s and 1930s in Australia is a neglected area of study. Few have questioned the view that Australia, in common with other industrial societies, offered greater opportunities for each succeeding generation. Indeed, Van Krieken et al. argued that sociologists who have looked at this question have generally been 'engaged in a broader argument against a Marxist interpretation of capitalist societies', convinced that class was not a determining factor in an individual's life chances. R. Van Krieken, *Sociology: themes and perspectives*, Longman, Sydney, 2000, p. 80. However, Connell and Irving suggest that, although the number of self-employed rose between 1911 and 1921, it gradually declined during the interwar period. Given that self-employment was one of the few avenues out of the working class, a contraction of such opportunities would suggest that social mobility, at least for the working class, concomitantly diminished in this period. R. W. Connell and T. H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980, p. 318. A more recent study by Erikson and Goldthorpe concluded that, despite the vision of Australia as a 'young' land of equal opportunity being an integral part of the national culture, actual rates and patterns of mobility did not differ widely from the industrial European societies that they studied. R. Erikson and J. H. Goldthorpe, *The Constant Flux: A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Societies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 308-337.

Anzac Day because the RSL leadership disapproved of his pacifist views.[97] During the interwar period, there were many community organisations where the voice of an Anzac was treated, outwardly at least, with deference and respect. Returned soldiers were frequently invited to speak at schools, fund-raisers, sporting events and other public affairs. Most notably, the RSL used such community interest to promote its ideology to the very young. After the NSW Executive of the League gave 'consideration to the matter of keeping in the minds of Australian school children the services of the A.I.F.', it resolved to cement the links between RSL sub-branches and their local schools by distributing photographs of prominent soldiers and Australian flags for the edification of the children.[98] Local Empire Day celebrations provided similar opportunities for RSL speakers to spread the message of white superiority and Empire fealty. In Broken Hill, the editor of the local Labor paper was moved to protest that Empire Day was probably the most sinister of the capitalist system's rituals because of the role it played in inculcating class propaganda in the minds of impressionable children.[99] In one example, a parent related the story of a student who had been asked the definition of an island, to which the child had dutifully replied 'a piece of land surrounded by Great Britain'. The parent approvingly remarked that, in Australia's case, this was true.[100] The following year, the RSL initiated an essay competition on the meaning of Anzac Day for local school children, so that later generations would not treat that special day 'as a regular holiday'. Instead, they would not fail to recognise 'the day on which Australia took her place among the nations of the world'.[101]

The RSL and racism

One of the most important tools used in RSL attempts to promote national unity was racism. If many ex-servicemen treated RSL claims of a classless bond between returned soldiers with some scepticism, there was no doubt that the AIF was

[97] A. Thomson, 'A Past You Can Live With: Digger Memories and the Anzac Legend', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 13, 1991, p. 17.
[98] *Reveille*, 8 August 1927.
[99] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 26 May 1927.
[100] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 25 May 1927.
[101] *Barrier Daily Truth*, 18 April 1928.

predominantly white.[102] One of the early objects of the League was 'to perpetuate in the civil life of the nation the principles for which we have fought',[103] and this object frequently found its expression in a vigorous defence of the White Australia policy, often cited as one of the primary motives for enlistment. One early resolution from the Western Australian branch of the RSL insisted upon continued Federal Government vigilance over prospective immigrants, insisting that those soldiers who had been killed in World War One had forfeited their lives to keep Australia 'white'. The motion insisted on 'the retention of the "White Australia" Policy' and 'emphatically' protested:

> against any suggested amendments of our Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act so vitally necessary for the future welfare of Australia. Remembering that over fifty thousand of our comrades have voluntarily made the supreme sacrifice for their country's liberty and race purity.[104]

Against the claims of some anti-conscriptionists that the war had threatened to weaken the White Australia policy, the RSL promoted the achievements of the AIF as integral to the maintenance of the Empire, democracy and the 'Australian way of life'. In its view, the arrival of southern Europeans in Australia in the 1920s was a betrayal of those ideals. Every year, at both State and Federal level, the RSL passed motions to limit or end southern European immigration, to enforce more strict language tests and to scaremonger about the social dangers of non-British immigration. Typical of these motions was one passed at the League's 12th Annual Federal Congress, which read:

> 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 standard of Australian living conditions and to weaken the ties of Empire. Therefore, it affirms the desirability of the Commonwealth being populated with British stock; furthermore, it requests the Federal Government either to considerably reduce the present influx, or better still, to suspend it entirely.[105]

---

[102] For a brief discussion of Aboriginal servicemen in World War One, see R. A. Hall, *The Black Diggers*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997, pp. 1-7.
[103] Rules and Objects of the RSSILA, Department of Repatriation file, dated 12 November 1917, NAA: A2483, B18/1267.
[104] Letter, Western Australian branch of the RSL to Acting PM, dated 12 March 1919, NAA: A1/15, 1919/4097.
[105] Resolution sent to Prime Minister's Dept, 6th December, 1927, RSL Collection, MS 6609, item 3622B, National Library of Australia.

That the RSL saw itself as an agent of such ideology is evidenced by the keen interest the leadership took in the promotion of nationalism and Empire loyalty in any possible arena. At the same Congress, it was resolved:

> that the League should take the lead in and co-operate with all other bodies which aim at promoting the circulation of existing British films and which stand for the encouragement of the production of new films which show the history, the tradition and the industries of the British Empire to advantage.[106]

During the 1922 Federal election campaign, *The Digger* ran advertisements for the Liberal and National Party candidates, but no Labor election notices were allowed to grace its pages. Both Liberal and National candidates placed commitment to the White Australia policy at the top of their programmes, claiming that they, unlike Labor, were its only faithful guardians. Indeed, the National Party urged voters to 'Vote National and avoid the Liberal bleat for a piebald population'.[107] For their part, the Liberals urged a vote for a more modest platform – simply to 'smash the Labor extremists'.[108] Major G. D. Treloar, who acted as a voluntary speaker for the Nationalists in the 1927 NSW State Election, reported that he had faced considerable opposition from the Left because he was a returned soldier. His response was to try to drive a wedge between his working class opponents and their more left-wing political affiliations on the basis of racism. He was quoted as saying:

> it seems a very strange thing that so many people are prepared to be friends of foreigners and enemies of their own kith and kin. Men who preach class consciousness here are creating a spirit which if allowed to grow will mean the death of patriotism and all the people's finer feelings towards their country.[109]

Such an outburst was in complete accordance with the RSL policy. From the earliest RSL Congresses, a delegate would move a motion, always unanimously passed,

---

[106] *Reveille*, 21 January 1928.
[107] *The Digger*, 24 November 1922.
[108] *The Digger*, 8 December 1922.
[109] *SMH*, 14 October 1927. Such views fully accorded with Treloar's subsequent leadership role in the indomitably anti-Labor New Guard. See Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, pp. 144, 148.

expressing 'unswerving adherence to the White Australia principle' and opposition to southern European immigration, accompanied by the usual demands for government action to halt the detested 'influx'.[110] By 1931, this position was no less strident. At the Federal Congress that year, a resolution was passed to protest 'against employment of foreign labour to the exclusion of Australian and British workmen'.[111] So numerous were these missives that an irritated tone can be discerned in many of the government replies to these resolutions, as various bureaucrats assured the League that stringent immigration checks were in place. Also in 1931, the League advised the Department of Home Affairs that it intended to propose a resolution at its forthcoming Federal Congress that aliens convicted of criminal offences should be deported, along with all southern Europeans who were not naturalised. The government's reply attempted to reassure the League that there was 'no laxity' in dealing with the deportation of convicted criminals and rejected the proposal to deport unnaturalised southern Europeans as 'unreasonable'.[112]

It might be argued that RSL opposition to southern European immigration was a point of disagreement between the RSL on one hand and the Nationalist Government and the employers on the other. However, all three groups were dominated by pro-White Australia politics, but had different views on how it should operate. The Federal Government and rural and mine employers were tempted to refine the tenets of White Australia because of the tantalising prospect of an increased supply of unorganised workers at the right price. As the following case studies suggest, the RSL's opposition to the arrival of migrants for 'the mines or the bush' encouraged a hostile welcome for such workers, without ever seriously threatening their continued arrival. The RSL propagandised about non-British immigration among its working class members because it was one of the few ways to feign concern about working class living standards without supporting campaigns for higher wages. As a result, its propaganda was a welcome corollary to employer hopes that the migrants remain non-unionised, by

[110] Report on 7th Annual Congress of the RSL, Department of Repatriation correspondence file, NAA: A2487, 1922/11616.
[111] *Reveille*, 30 November 1931.
[112] Letter, Department of Home Affairs to Federal RSL, RSL collection, MS 6609, item 5756B, National Library of Australia.

encouraging local workers to identify migrant workers as the principal source of workplace problems.

Conclusion

Far from being shaped from below, the RSL was sponsored by the ruling class, led by the ruling class and furthered the interests of the ruling class. While its public role was to promote the well-being of returned soldiers, its true purpose was to garner a small, but loyal, section of an otherwise fractious AIF for continued service to the nation and to deflect returned soldiers away from militant labour activities. As a cross-class organisation, RSL officials, many of them drawn from the Protestant, middle and upper class AIF officer stratum, played an important role in manufacturing conservative ideology and attempted, through working class League members, to influence the labour movement from which they were otherwise politically, industrially and socially removed. As a result, conservative working class soldiers were groomed for the tasks of union-busting, right-wing electioneering and migrant scapegoating.