

GOING TO WAR IN 1914

How did Australia enter the Great War in 1914? In the case of Australia, Britain's decision for war simply could not be evaded. As a self-governing 'Dominion' within the British Empire, Australia could not exempt itself from a British declaration of war. Australia believed – that is to say, the executive, the parliamentary majority, and most legal experts believed – that under international law Australia had no power to choose neutrality. Dissenters from that consensus were in the minority.

The European crisis erupted in late July 1914. This happened to be in the middle of an Australian federal election campaign. In the context of that election campaign, Australia's political leaders competed with each other in making sweeping promises of unlimited aid to Britain, if war broke out. Australia's key decision came in the early evening of Monday 3 August. A rump of the Cabinet of Prime Minister Joseph Cook (four of ten ministers) authorised the Governor-General, Ronald Munro Ferguson, to despatch a cable to the Colonial Secretary in London. This cable offered, in the event of war, the immediate transfer of the Royal Australian Navy to the British Admiralty, and an expeditionary force of 20,000 men 'to any destination' and 'at [the] complete disposal of the Home Government.' Australia would meet all costs. This remarkable offer – including the use of the term 'Home' -- was made some forty hours (in real time) before the British government actually declared war upon Germany late on Tuesday 4 August. In this sense, Australia jumped the gun. She leapt into the war without equivocation.

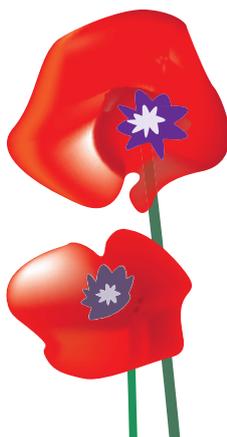
How did Great Britain enter the war? There was no parliamentary or even Cabinet decision for war. The British Cabinet was deeply divided between interventionists and neutralists. The leading men, Asquith, Grey, and Churchill favoured instant intervention. But the majority faction of neutralists wanted Britain to stick rigidly to diplomatic mediation. Grey made the case to the House of Commons for rapid British intervention in his only major statement on Monday 3 August. On the morning of Tuesday 4 August, Germany invaded Belgium. Before the Cabinet met, Grey and Asquith sent a cable to Berlin warning Germany to respect Belgian neutrality. Cabinet endorsed a second cable, demanding an answer by midnight. But it is not clear that the Cabinet actually decided upon an immediate declaration of war upon Germany that evening.

According to British legal authorities, the 'war powers' were reserved solely to the King – in practice, with the King acting upon the advice of the Prime Minister. In the event, this was the course followed. There was no Cabinet meeting to declare war. Asquith and just four ministers, gathered in the Cabinet room on the evening of Tuesday 4 August, decided that Britain must declare war immediately. The Privy Council was the chosen instrument. Asquith requested the King to preside at a Privy Council to approve war. The King and three Privy Councillors - not one elected man among them - endorsed the declaration of war. These events in London determined Australia's war. News of war arrived in Australia as a *fait accompli*.

The consequences for Australia

Australia's willing subservience to Britain in 1914 had serious and costly consequences. Australia's government had signalled that it was ready to subordinate Australian lives and treasure to the decision-makers of the 'Home Government' in London.

In so doing, Australia's political leaders had set up the nation to be taken for granted. Accordingly, Australia was not consulted about where her forces would be deployed, or for what purposes they would fight. She was cut out of the high diplomacy of the war, until the final year of the conflict. Thus, Australia was committed to Britain's ever-expanding list of war aims, through secret deals which Australia knew almost nothing about: for example, the Straits Agreement (March 1915), the Treaty of London (April 1915), the Sykes-Picot Agreements (May 1916), the St-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreements (April 1917), and many others. The idea that Australians fought simply for 'freedom' under the Union Jack, in a war that Australia chose to fight, is very misleading.



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