

Former Australian prime minister calls for mandatory national service for young people

Owen Howell
17 November 2022

Last week, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott called for the introduction of compulsory national service for young people after finishing secondary school. Speaking on the *Heartland* podcast hosted by a right-wing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, he said it was time to “start having a conversation about national service.”

Abbott, who led the Liberal-National Coalition before being ousted in 2015, proposed that 18-year-olds should be expected to spend a “significant period of time” of at least six to 12 months serving in the armed forces as a “basically-trained infantry soldier.”

“We constantly talk about rights,” he said. “Yes, we have rights and the government has certain obligations to us which it should do its best to discharge. But this is a two-way street. It’s about giving as well as receiving, and I think we do have to talk more about what we can give back to our country.”

Abbott, who lost his seat in parliament in the 2019 federal election, further suggested that school-leavers could do their national service working at schools in remote indigenous communities or deploy as an Australian Peace Corps to the South Pacific. Another possibility was for recruits to “volunteer in a nursing home.”

Underlying these comments was a deep concern over the Australian military’s inability to recruit among younger generations. “We have to get serious about the nuts and bolts of our military preparedness, and this is where we’ve got some very, very big problems,” Abbott said.

These remarks sharply reflect the considerations of sections of the Australian ruling class, faced with an acute labour shortage and the need to prosecute the US-led war drive against China. They must be taken by young people and workers as a warning of the future

they confront.

Although often dismissed as a “fringe” commentator, Abbott speaks for a significant section of the corporate and military elite, acting as a political flag-bearer.

In September 2020, Abbott branded any measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 as a “health dictatorship” and called for the elderly to be left to die from the virus. While at the time neither Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison nor his Labor Party counterparts stated their calculations so bluntly, both federal and state governments began ending all public health measures last December, as part of the “live with the virus” agenda.

Abbott’s suggestion to use young recruits as cheap or free labour in aged care facilities reveals the domestic motivations behind the call for mandatory service.

Under Abbott’s plan, new soldiers could be deployed to plug up workforce holes, which are a consequence of the government’s pro-business response to the pandemic, with more than 15,000 people dying from COVID-19, the majority this year, many workers contracting the virus or quitting work because of intolerable workloads and fear of infection.

The stationing of troops throughout a range of communities would also assist in the normalisation of militarism and “wartime conditions.”

Abbott’s comments on the podcast were provoked after the interviewer referred to recent statements by shadow defence minister Andrew Hastie regarding military recruitment.

Hastie, a former SAS captain, spoke to a business breakfast in Perth on the alleged need to drastically increase military spending, build strike capabilities, and recruit youth to the Australian Defence Force. According to the *Australian* newspaper, Hastie warned that “the window is closing fast” for the Australian

government to prepare for a major conflict with a regional “adversary,” that is, China.

Hastie spoke of targeting “Gen Z” (aged 6 to 24 years) and the younger “Gen Alpha” (zero to 10 years), in order to fulfill the “huge task” of expanding the armed forces. The challenge, he said, was providing “a message that appeals to young hearts and minds searching for purpose.” He added: “Emphasising the service ethos is critical. Duty, honour and country.”

Such statements are being made under conditions of escalating tension between the United States and its major economic rival China, which threatens the eruption of a nuclear third world war. While waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, US imperialism and its allies are deliberately aiming to open up another front against China over Taiwan, with Australia on the front line.

Successive Australian governments, Coalition and Labor alike, have worked closely with the US to transform Australia into a launching pad for military operations in the Indo-Pacific. In 2011, the Gillard Labor government’s embrace of the US “pivot to Asia,” aimed at provoking conflict with China, was a turning point. Under the Biden administration, Australia has joined the AUKUS and Quad military alliances and recently announced the US deployment of nuclear-capable B-52 bombers in northern Australia.

While not as explicit in stating its aims as warmongers like Hastie and Abbott, the current Albanese Labor government has demonstrated its firm commitment to the geopolitical and domestic interests of Australian imperialism, including the drive to war.

In a speech on Monday, Defence Minister Richard Marles echoed Hastie’s concerns over military recruitment, saying the defence force faced a “personnel crisis” that required “urgent action.” He hinted at decisions to be announced next March in the Defence Strategy Review: “[As] we think about how we reconfigure our Defence Force for a very different strategic environment inevitably we will have to make some hard choices.”

This bipartisan militarist agenda has been developed largely behind the backs of the population, because the ruling class is keenly aware of the latent anti-war sentiment among youth and workers.

Abbott’s proposal was met with a negative reaction on social media. The barrage of hostile comments on

Twitter included: “Military service. Great. Train young people to kill other humans they neither know or see. Will the government cover the cost of PTSD treatment?”

Other comments included: “That should help mental illness in youth.” “Gotta get the cannon fodder to feed the dogs of war from somewhere.” “Hmm during a labour crisis, really.” “Next? War with China.”

Compulsory military service was last imposed in Australia between 1964 and 1971 to conscript 18-year-olds to fight and die in the Vietnam War. It was widely opposed by broad sections of the population and youth. Conscription was abolished in 1972 amid mass international protests against the war and an upsurge of the class struggle.

During World War I, the Australian population twice defeated referenda to impose conscription in 1916 and 1917. Anti-conscription rallies, involving industrial workers, were an expression of the mounting working-class opposition to war and nationalism as the battlefield carnage worsened.

The call to reintroduce mandatory service is thus a sign of the desperation of the Australian political establishment, as it prepares for the coming conflict with China and seeks to resolve the disastrous labour shortage at home.

Young people are being called upon to “sacrifice” themselves in the name of “national defence.” Such efforts must be rejected by youth, as part of a broader fight against the crisis-ridden capitalist system, which is hurtling humanity toward another world war, this time with nuclear weapons.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is calling for the building of an international anti-war movement of young people and workers. We encourage all youth and students to register for the IYSSE’s global webinar on Sunday 11 December, 5:00 a.m. (AEDT), and take up the struggle against the future of war and social misery presented under capitalism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact