Conservatism and change:
the RSL and Australian society, 1916-1932

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Abstract

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This thesis has two main themes: a history of the RSL in its formative years, and a study of the RSL and conservatism in Australia between 1916 and 1932. By looking at the RSL as an agent of both reaction and change, the thesis hopes to contribute to an understanding of what it meant to be conservative in Australia during and after the first world war.

The thesis argues that while many of the RSL's values, particularly the belief that political change should be gradual not sudden, conformed to those central to conservative ideology, in certain domestic matters such as repatriation and social welfare the RSL contributed significantly to change in Australian society. The thesis concentrates particularly on Australians' increased acceptance of a more interventionist state, and looks at the way in which its war experience caused the RSL to evolve attitudes toward state intervention which ran counter to those of many conservatives.
The thesis also looks at the way in which nationalism shifted from the possession of the Left before the war to that of the Right after 1915. It argues that the first world war had a profound effect on the subsequent direction of Australian society, and that the RSL had a role in this. It concludes that one of the enduring legacies of the first world war was that the vision and idealism of the prewar era were overtaken and replaced by a conservative preoccupation with national stability, national safety, and national integrity.