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# The Impact of the World War I on the British Politics and Society

## In what ways did the First World War alter the nature of British politics and society?

Although no conflict took place on home soil at any point during the First World War, its effects were strong enough to alter everyday life in Britain, both during and after its battles. The most important and apparent of these alterations were clearly to British society and politics. The sheer scale of the Great War meant that such changes were inevitable. The change from voluntary enlistment to conscription illustrates one of many social changes during this time. The masses of men disappearing to fight for their King and country left many families, businesses and communities at a loss. The war effected the women on the home front also, giving them opportunity to contribute in the form of important labour positions no longer filled by men. Many have argued this impacted their ability to gain the vote. A number of political changes were directly impacted by the First World War. There was a new uprise in radicalised movements in Britain spurred by the war. Many parts of Glasgow saw the socialist movement take form. New acts of censorship and penalty such as the Defence of the Realm Act were also introduced in order to take care of the home front efficiently.

The change from voluntary enlistment to conscription was a huge turning point for many. It turned the tables from spectating to participation for millions of young men who had previously supported the war, but had no intention of taking any part in it. The decision to introduce conscription was of course necessary if Britain wanted to contribute to the war in an effective manor. Although this is not to say that volunteering had been a failure. In the years 1914 to 1915, Britain had mustered up 'the second largest volunteer army in history', it just wasn't enough to compete in the largest war the world had seen. Parliament was deeply torn on such a decision to force men to war, yet the French morale was at breaking point, and it was clear more men were needed. In March 1916 the Military Service act was then passed, in order to conscript 'single men aged 18 to 40, unless widowed with children or a minister of religion'. During the following years 2.5 million men would enter the war through conscription. This huge scale of compulsory enlistment may have had hugely beneficial effects on the Western front, but at home, its lack of popularity showed. Conscientious objectors began to speak out against the new system, proclaiming their rights of freedom to take no part in war on the grounds of their religion, thoughts or conscience. Over 200,000 of them took to Trafalgar Square in April 1916 to protest against it. There was tribunal after tribunal for men who wished to object to conscription on these grounds, but many were turned away as cowards. Of course the value of even the

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smallest exemption from the war was huge, as explained by Gregory. 'It allowed men time to get their affairs in order, and also significantly reduced the chances off being killed.' Yet it was a hard case to argue. Even the church would proclaim that murder in such circumstances was acceptable to protect the country and its people. And with such huge voluntary numbers, the rest of society began to frown upon the objectors. But it was those such as John Maclean who would go on to make huge impacts on British society. He was set against the war, and was arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act for his beliefs. From then on he began to help develop a Socialist movement that would soon shake parts of Glasgow and have the government on their toes with fear of revolution. These were all hugely important social alterations brought about by the First world War.

Another main social impact the war had on the home front was on women. With the absence of literally millions of men as the war churned on, it was up to the women at home to man important positions of labour that were crucial to the country's war effort. This included filing jobs in munitions and jute factories in order to send the necessary supplies to the Western front, but also jobs that would keep the country running smoothly at home, such as bus drivers. Many of these changes in women's daily lives were completely unheard of. Women were generally accepted to need little education in the world of work, as their place was at home. However their involvement was necessary, as stated by Turner 'The War demanded extensive participation by women in formal labour market, to release men for other duties.' This would alter British society forever. Although the demand for women's rights to vote had been long fought for by both the Suffragettes and the Suffragists, this would be a foot hole for women to prove their ability in times of struggle. By 1918 over 6 million women were granted the vote, with the following years to allow more and more women that ability. Many have argued that their war work was a key factor in their victory. However the absence of men was not a complete positive for women at home. The racking deaths and casualties brought on by the war was effecting everyone. All across Britain families were losing brothers, fathers and sons. It was almost unheard of to talk to someone who was not effected in one way or another. The women were faced with grief and work as they fought their own war at home, but there would not truly be time for grief until the war was over. But the war was truly only a foot hole for women at the time. As they were expected to give up their newly found independence when the men returned. The men needed jobs and the families needed the women, but it was clear many would not be willing, as written by one employer at the time. 'These women will not want to return to their domestic duties after the war. The widening women's sphere and outlook is a phase greatly accentuated by war conditions and will never go back to what it used to be.' It is clear to see the monumental impact that the First World War had on women at home, as the country was culturally altered for the future.

The war also shook the face of British politics. There were a great deal of political changes, both during and after the war, but a focal change would be the sudden radicalisation of many

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people in Britain as an effect of war. Many protests began in anti war movement that would continue to rally well into the 1920s. One of the more famous of these movements occurring during the Red Clydeside. This was an era of political radicalism that would summarise the socialist movement in the city of Glasgow and the areas surrounding the banks of the river Clyde. Famous individuals such as Willie Gallacher and David Kirkwood campaigned against David Lloyd George's Liberal government for their war time munitions acts, and were arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act. Further political uprising saw the spread of a great deal of socialist rent strikes, in protest of landlords who took advantage of the surge of women renting rooms near their newly assigned workplace. This sort of Socialist uprising was not uncommon throughout the rest of Britain, and for a time the government feared revolution. The war had begun to worry many socialists in Britain, it was capable of turning the country's political system upside down, or even worse, reinforce the growing capitalism. 'Socialists such as G.D.H. Cole and R.H. Tawney became alarmed by wartime collectivism which seemed to make capitalism more secure by guaranteeing profits and uniting employers.' It was clear that there would be further action while the war went on, but there was little suppression after 1918. The war had riled a new form of radicalism in Britain that would continue to rally throughout the Second World War. The fear of possible revolution worsened as Russia began its own revolution. But there was never any real uprising. Protest was followed by protest and demand was followed by demand. The people had had enough of conflict.

In order to understand the true alterations to British politics during the First World War, one must examine the war time governance. It was a time to seriously revise the way Britain was run, and it was clear a new set of acts and policies would be necessary. One of the most famous tools used to control wartime Britain was the Defence of the Realm Act. Passed by the House of Commons in 1914 it gave the government a huge list of executive powers that were deemed necessary in controlling Britain efficiently during the war. This included the suppression of public criticism, the ability to take control of economic resources for the war effort, and the ability to imprison without trial. Many were outraged by the new invasive measures, yet it had been deemed necessary. Its intentions were to prevent invasion on the home front whilst keeping morale high overall. People at home were not to see or hear of the atrocities happening over seas, and anyone who attempted to break the rules and aid the enemy would be sentenced to death. The bottom line was to keep the home front safe and functioning smoothly. For many it did just that, they were oblivious to the fact that the letters they received from France were censored, and many had no interest in a great deal of the other rules created. The only time it became a real issue was with day to day implements such as pub opening hours. Pubs were now forced to close early every night in order to keep workers productive in their war work, but this was understood as a worthy sacrifice by many in Britain's war efforts. The Defence of the Realm Act summarises the huge changes in British politics in order to accommodate the strains war had on the home front. It arguably had a substantial effect on the country's productivity and allowed for total control of the necessary assets at hand.

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To conclude, the First World War clearly altered the nature of British politics and society both during and after its battles. The need for conscription created an uproar from the men who wished to have no part in war. Objectors were ridiculed and trialled for the opportunity to be excused from the war, while millions of young men were sent to their slaughter. Women were equally effected by the need to fill important gaps in labour that men had left empty. Giving them a chance to prove their ability and eventually begin their gradual journey to receive the vote. Political changes were also present during and after the war, with the rise of socialist movements such as the Red Clydeside standing against new found government suppression and hatred of war. Finally, radical acts such as the Defence of the Realm Act were put in place to sensor and control the home front, in order to prevent invasion or shivers in morale from engulfing Britain.

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