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0521824249 - From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration

James Jupp

Excerpt

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Introduction

Thirty years ago Australia finally abandoned its 'settled policy' of excluding all immigrants who were not 'white'. Instead of being the 'most British' country in the world it began to proclaim itself as the 'most multicultural'. One-fifth of its people were no longer of predominantly British or Irish descent. This radical change appeared to have been accepted with very little opposition. Mass immigration continued. Between one-third and one-half came from backgrounds which would have excluded them during the previous seventy years. In March 2002 Australia officially welcomed the six millionth post-war immigrant – a Filipina information technologist.

At the same time Australia was responsible for detaining Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers at remote desert and Pacific Island camps: Woomera, Curtin, Port Hedland, Nauru and Manus Island. Their fates were uncertain. There were repeated riots and disturbances at Woomera and elsewhere. Policy made on the run in the election atmosphere of late 2001 had left many loose ends. Many hundreds of desperate individuals, including women and children, who sought to escape from states denounced by the United States as 'the axis of evil' had become pawns in a bureaucratic and political game. There was a basic contradiction between the continuing desire to people Australia and the fear that matters might get out of control.

I have assumed that immigration policy has three facets: selection and control of the intake; services and support for those who have settled; and policies designed to manage the consequences of creating a multicultural society through immigration. All of these at various times have been the responsibility of the Commonwealth

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Department of Immigration, which still proclaims them as its three functions.

It is argued here that, while Australian immigration and multi-cultural policy has been a success, it is also much more of a contested area than was previously supposed. The consensus between and within the political parties has broken down. A new party, One Nation led by Pauline Hanson, became very popular for a while. It built on accumulating grievances, among which was the retreat from ethnic homogeneity. A policy shift from 'populate or perish' to 'economic rationalism' moved the emphasis from numbers to quality. In the process some of the humanitarian aspects of previous policies were lost sight of. This trend reached its height with the furore over asylum seekers in 2001. The internment in remote desert camps and tropical islands, and the resulting protests from the inmates, sharpened the division between those wanting a liberal policy and those wanting to discourage and punish those who arrived without official selection.

Throughout this study of the years 1972 to 2002 I have used terms which are not universally accepted and which need definition. By 'racist', I mean a fairly complex position which argues that clearly identifiable races not only exist but are hierarchically graded. Thus, all members of a race are either superior or inferior to all members of another race. As an ideology, racism often argues for a worldwide struggle between races. This view was based on a misreading of Darwin's theory of evolution and was widely held in the nineteenth century. Its horrendous consequences under the Nazis discredited the theory and the term 'race'.

By 'xenophobic', I mean a simpler psychological reaction to people who originate in a different homeland and who are believed to be physically or culturally different. This is an almost universal condition but, like the urge to murder or steal, is necessarily controlled in a civilised society. On this definition far more people are 'xenophobic' than are 'racist'. It is a difficult word, unknown to many, but useful in describing attitudes which are not fully racist or based on physical appearance. Fear of another religion or language is xenophobia, not racism.

I use the term 'ethnic' as it is colloquially used in Australia, to mean someone not derived from the British Isles. This is not very

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scientific but is commonly understood and is used by 'ethnic' organisations and individuals. While attempts have been made in New South Wales to ban both 'ethnic' and 'Anglo-Celtic', they have not had much impact anywhere else. 'Ethnic' is a useful shorthand when discussing multiculturalism and the extent to which immigrants may, or should, assimilate to what is claimed to be the majority culture.

As it was used for most of the past thirty years, I have preferred the term 'non-English-speaking background' (NESB) to the new coinage 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (CALD). The latter is rarely used, even in official publications, although it was urged on ethnic organisations for a time by compliant public servants. Why such a change was needed was never explained by the Howard government which tried to introduce it.

As for the majority, or 'mainstream', I prefer the term 'Anglo-Australian' in a cultural rather than a racial or ethnic sense. The bare majority who are of third or earlier generations is overwhelmingly derived from the British Isles and speaks only English. 'Anglo-Celtic' will do, but 'Anglo-Saxon' is only a language. All permanent residents are, of course, equally Australians, especially if they have become citizens. I have distinguished between 'British/Irish' and 'Europeans', as did official policy until 1958 and to some extent until 1983. This is how all involved saw things and most still do. Australia was not settled by 'Europeans' but by the 'British', partly to keep 'Europeans' out! Its subsequent history was determined by that fact.

As a rule I use official terms where possible, although these often change. I refer throughout to the Immigration Department, as this has had five different names since it was founded in 1945 and this can get confusing (see Acronyms and Abbreviations). Unless otherwise indicated, the term 'minister' refers to the head of this department. I use figures derived from official sources, including the Census and the returns of the Immigration Department. Some of these are challenged by others and some are presented so as to make a particular case. But, generally speaking, Australia has some of the best official migration statistics in the world. I prefer to stick with them.

I have been personally involved in immigration and multicultural policy in Australia for much of the period discussed in this

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book. The opinions I express are my own and are based on discussions with a wide range of people in the course of conferences, committees, seminars and interviews. As the whole area is contentious and politicised, it will be clear that I prefer some viewpoints to others. As official departmental documents will not be available for up to thirty years, I have drawn on my own experiences and on a wide range of publicly available sources.

While there are several ways of discussing immigration, I have adopted the approach of a political scientist and a participant. I do not believe that immigration can be discussed without understanding the political context. Policy may be made by rational bureaucrats. But it is invariably developed within the political process and against a background of public opinion. While it is an aspiration of Australian policy makers to be rational and detached, the reality is rather different.

My own views should be quite apparent. I believe that Australia needs a continuing and planned immigration program into the future, that the sources from which immigrants are drawn make a multicultural approach to policy essential, and that policy should be shaped in the knowledge that human beings are involved and not just factors of production. I accept that politicians must work within limits set by public opinion. But I do not accept that majority opinion is always right. Changing public opinion is a necessary feature of democracy and, in this area, often essential.

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Creating an immigrant society, 1788–1972

Australia is an immigrant society. Without continual immigration the modern, urbanised and affluent society of today could not have been created. Australia is also the product of conscious social engineering to create a particular kind of society. This distinguishes it from other immigrant societies such as the United States, Argentina or even Canada, where the role of the state was less apparent and where private initiative was more important. Almost alone, with New Zealand, Australian governments set out to create a specific model using immigration and the introduction of overseas capital and technology. They are still doing so today, although naturally the goals and methods have changed over the past two centuries.¹

A new Britannia

Australia and New Zealand are the two ‘most British’ societies in the world outside the United Kingdom. Australia is the ‘most Irish’ society outside Ireland, although the United States attracted vastly more Irish immigrants to a much larger society. New Zealand might contest with Canada for the title of the ‘most Scottish’ society outside Scotland. The often repeated and incorrect claim that Australia is the ‘most multicultural society in the world’ does not bear close inspection. It is certainly much more multicultural than it was fifty years ago when the post-war immigration program began. It is even more multicultural than it was at Federation in 1901, when 20 per cent of its people were overseas-born and it had large German and Chinese minorities. But it is still much more a ‘British’ society than either Canada or the United States in terms of origins. Nor can it compare with such truly multicultural societies as India, Russia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea or most of the states

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of Africa. Its social, intellectual, business and political élites are still overwhelmingly of British origin; three-quarters of its people speak only English; and a similar proportion subscribe, however nominally, to Christian denominations.

How, then, did Australia become so similar in its culture and ethnic makeup to a society at the other end of the world? Certainly not by accident. The whole thing was carefully and deliberately planned within the context of the worldwide British empire. It is still being planned now that the empire has gone, using immigration as a method of controlling population change. This has been just as true for governments claiming to believe in the free market as for those subscribing to planning and social engineering. The successes of Australian immigration are largely due to deliberate planning. The assumption that bureaucrats and politicians have superior wisdom lies behind public policy. This may be misguided but it has produced a better social outcome than a free market in labour or a succession of ad hoc reactions to international movement and local public opinion. It is not, however, a value-free process. Australia has long and strong xenophobic, racist and insular traditions and they have always influenced immigration policy. Policy has always been influenced by ideologies: imperialism, racism, utilitarianism, economic rationalism and humanitarianism.

Australian immigration policy over the past 150 years has rested on three pillars; the maintenance of British hegemony and 'white' domination; the strengthening of Australia economically and militarily by selective mass migration; and the state control of these processes. The first has become less important in recent years but still exercises some minds; the second has been challenged by those who believe the population is large enough already; but the third remains, even while governments move away from the concept of a planned and engineered society towards notions of free markets and personal initiative. Immigration remains one of the few policy areas where to be an 'economic rationalist' means to be a planner and organiser.

White Australia

Australia's nearest neighbours were non-Europeans, although many were under European, including British, colonial control. Emigration from Indonesia was rare and, like emigration from India,

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mainly organised for imperialist purposes to plantation economies. Emigration from China was growing from the 1840s when Britain established its colony in Hong Kong and forcibly 'opened up' China to world trade. Emigration from Japan was prohibited until 1866. The islands of the Pacific were sparsely populated and did not begin to come under direct colonial control until the 1870s and even later. The small Australian population saw its main threat as coming from China, which had a population of 300 million even in the mid-nineteenth century. The arrival of many thousands of Chinese on the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s ignited a fear which remained central to immigration policy for the next century and has not yet finally disappeared.

Attitudes towards race a century ago were based on several propositions, some of which are still influential. One was the idea of a 'tree of man' in which the various races – Caucasian, Negroid, Mongoloid and Australoid – occupied different levels. The white Caucasians were placed at the top because of their superior strength, technology, wisdom and, in many eyes, Christianity. At the bottom were the Australian Aborigines. This hierarchy of races was justified by a perversion of Darwin's theory of evolution, in which the fittest survived and the weakest were subjugated or eliminated. Darwin did not apply this theory to humans, but as 'Social Darwinism' it enjoyed much support and has not yet completely died out. It was further believed that interbreeding between races would drag the higher down to the lower, although this does not correspond to Darwin's observations of the animal world either. On this view, contact between races other than by conquest and subjection was undesirable. This was clearly a rationalisation of imperialism, where small numbers of British soldiers had conquered vast numbers of Indians.

The implications for immigration were that non-Caucasians should only be introduced for menial tasks, should be segregated from Caucasians and should not be allowed to remain permanently, to intermarry or to enjoy the same rights as others. The fullest version of this in practice in the nineteenth century was in the segregated states of the United States. The fullest version in the twentieth was in apartheid South Africa.

Few Australians rationalised their fear of non-Europeans in such theoretical terms. But many politicians and journalists did, including those supporting the new labour movement which gave rise to

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the Australian Labor Party in 1891. As in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere, the labour movement feared for working conditions and wages if inferior races used to inferior conditions were able to dominate the labour market. But it is a simple generalisation to believe that the White Australia policy was only a reflection of economic interest. Labor pioneers, including the most radical, were usually rabid racists by modern standards. They did not extend their condemnation to Aborigines, who they regarded as a dying race and no threat to working conditions. But their fear and loathing of the Chinese were often pathological.

In contrast to the United States, however, Australian racism was not particularly violent except towards Aborigines. In all the anti-Chinese disturbances from Buckland River (1857) onwards, there are few examples of violent deaths. Rather than relying on riots, murders and lynching, Australians looked to the state to exclude the inferior races by law. Immigration control, consequently, was at the heart of what became known from the 1880s as the White Australia policy. When the Commonwealth was founded in 1901 this control went to the new government, which immediately passed the Immigration Restriction Act through parliament. This remained in force until replaced by the Migration Act in 1958.²

The Act of 1901 nowhere mentions race or the White Australia policy. Equally, the Act of 1958 allowed the policy to be maintained for more than ten years, while also not mentioning either of these. It is still in force, with amendments, now that the policy has been dead for thirty years. This illuminates one of the stranger features of Australian immigration policy: the consistent denial by officials of something which everyone knows to be true – from ‘There is no racial discrimination’ to ‘Detention centres are not prisons’. The reason for this original obfuscation was to satisfy the objections of the British government, which had to pass the Australian Constitution through the British parliament. As the majority of British subjects by 1900 were Indians or Africans, and as Britain had important trade and strategic interests with China and Japan, they objected to any overt hint of racial discrimination. Hence the insertion in the 1901 Act of the device of the dictation test.

The dictation test was probably the most hypocritical invention in the long history of Australian immigration, and there have been

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several. It authorised an officer at the point of arrival to administer a dictation test of 500 words. It was understood, though nowhere stated, that this should be in a language not known to the immigrant. The test was removed from the 1958 Act and was only used in fewer than 2000 cases, mostly in the first few years after 1901. By then shipping companies knew not to issue tickets to those likely to be excluded and were penalised if they did. The threat of the test was, however, extremely effective. A message was sent out to the world that 'coloured' people could not settle in Australia. They did not. By 1947 the non-European population, other than Aborigines, was measured by the Census as 0.25 per cent of the total. Australia had become one of the 'whitest' countries in the world outside northwestern Europe.

After the passage of the Migration Act, which required landing permits usually issued overseas, the officers of the Immigration Department had the unenviable task of judging the degree of 'blood' in the veins of applicants for settlement. This was purely racist and similar to Nazi and South African thinking. The pretence of labour protection or cultural inferiority was replaced by an argument from social harmony. It was claimed by ministers and their apologists that to bring into Australia anyone who looked different would provoke social unrest in a totally homogeneous white British society. The example of the United States was regularly quoted. With the arrival of West Indians in England and rioting in London and Nottingham in 1958, the British example (which was arguably more relevant) became more popular. Official policy endorsed popular prejudice rather than discredited Social Darwinist theories. Australia was to be protected from civil disorder by keeping out those likely to provoke it, however innocent themselves. Exceptions were made for temporary residents and tourists, but they were not allowed to remain permanently and were few in numbers.

White Australia had aspects other than immigration policy. The expectation that Aborigines would either die out or that colour would be 'bred out' was widespread. It was also contradictory. Those most in favour of 'breeding out colour' were usually appalled at the idea of 'half-castes'. It was the product of mixed marriages who were usually taken from their parents to assimilate them to white society. Non-Europeans were also denied naturalisation or,

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towards the end of the policy, could only secure it after three times as long in the country as anyone else. As unnaturalised 'aliens' they were frequently denied welfare services or licences. Some of these restrictions were imposed by States and not by the Commonwealth. Non-Europeans were also barred from serving in the armed forces, although many did during the world wars.

Increasingly the policy was becoming untenable and even ridiculous. It was modified through the 1960s, especially by Harold Holt's administration on succeeding Sir Robert Menzies.³ Finally it was declared as one of the first acts of the Whitlam government in 1972 that race, colour or creed would no longer be a basis for immigration control. No change in legislation was needed. This ended a long and increasingly embarrassing period when immigration policy had to be rationalised by hypocrisy, lies and evasions.

Populate or perish

Concern with racial purity has attracted more attention than the parallel concern with building the population in order to preserve the continent for its colonisers. In the early days the main threat to the British Australian population had been the intrusion of other European powers into the South Pacific. The Dutch had claimed Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) as early as 1642, but they were satisfied with their Indonesian empire and increasingly allied with the British. The French might have claimed New South Wales had they arrived slightly before Captain Phillip in 1788. The Russians were in the Pacific well before the British. The Germans were more of a threat by the end of the nineteenth century. British soldiers withdrew from Australia in 1870, but the British navy was assumed to be quite capable of protecting Australia from its bases in Singapore and Hong Kong. Fear of the Chinese and Japanese was alleviated by the strict imposition of the White Australia policy, at least until 1941. But many Australians were conscious that they were a small isolated people, very far from their original homeland. Blainey's 'tyranny of distance' was only too real when it took weeks to get to England, as it did well into the 1960s for most people.

Edmund Barton's concept of 'a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation' dominated thinking at Federation in 1901.