

THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY AND ASIAN IMMIGRATION

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The aspect of Australian society and politics which seems to most interest Japanese students is immigration. Australia's massive immigration programme of the last generation and the government's embrace of the idea of multi-culturalism are both phenomena very foreign to the Japanese emphasis on population control and maintaining homogeneity. There is also a great interest in the White Australia Policy and attitudes to Asian migration, partly prompted by questions about the extent to which Australia's racist past persists into the present. This general interest coexists with a great deal of ignorance both about the history of the White Australia Policy and about present Australian policies. It is the aim of this article to give an overview of the development of the policy, to suggest some of the forces behind it and the counter-forces which finally brought about its demise. Finally the issues involved with the recent large-scale entry of Indochinese are examined.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT TO 1901

The first white immigrants who landed in Australia in 1788 had no choice in the matter. They were either convicts or soldiers, sent to begin the new British penal colony. By around 1840 however colonial life in Australia had assumed its own distinctive character, and many inhabitants had come to identify with their new society. By this time, the number of free settlers and former convicts formed a majority, and a strong movement against the continued transportation of British convicts had grown up. A large part of its motivation was economic. The relative labour shortage in the colonies had allowed the majority of its inhabitants to attain a standard of living their peers in England had never enjoyed. The continuing influx of cheap convict labour was a threat both to their economic position and to the embryonic society which was becoming the subject of their allegiance and future aspirations.

The dominant opinion that the colonies should remain white and British was in some senses an extension of the antitransportation movements. Various schemes were advanced for the importation of coloured labour, especially by large landowners, but only a very few of these eventuated. Moral repugnance against slavery was already strongly rooted

among influential groups. Popular opposition to the large-scale importation of 'coolie' labour was based on the immediate threat to economic conditions and to the way of life taking root in the colonies. A few far-sighted colonial administrators, such as Sir James Stephen, also appreciated the long-term and less obvious social costs of the exploitation of such a coloured under-class.

Another large part of the explanation was of course racism. It was completely natural and unremarkable that the early white settlers in Australia shared the racist views and assumptions which were then universal among Europeans. Individual differences within racial groups were under-estimated, while differences between groups were attributed to racial, rather than cultural, economic or other environmental causes. They shared assumptions about the whites' inherent superiority, as 'evidenced' by their military and technological domination of the coloured races.

The first strong challenge to the wish for racial homogeneity came with the gold rushes of the 1840s and especially 1850s. The gold rushes completely transformed the demography and economy of the fledgling colonies. In the decade 1850-1860 the population of Australia almost trebled from 405,000 to 1,145,000, while Victoria's rose from 76,000 to 538,000.²⁾ Soon the gold was exhausted, but a stronger, more diversified economy and numerous social changes endured.

Along with the gold prospectors arriving from Europe and America came an increasing number of Chinese. Overall their proportion was relatively small, but because nearly all the Chinese were adult males, their visibility and impact was much greater than numbers alone would suggest. In Victoria in 1859, there were 42,000 Chinese, comprising eight per cent of the total population, while another estimate claims that one adult male in seven was Chinese, so that in some gold fields they would have been close to a majority.³⁾

The situation was ripe for conflict. The Chinese were conspicuous because they arrived in large groups, and their appearance and dress differed so much from the whites. The white miners' racist inclinations found ready ammunition in the clannishness of the Chinese and their strange customs. The use of prostitution and the amount of homosexuality among the Chinese miners was taken as evidence of their immorality. The lack of normal female relationships also led to such practices among white miners but this probably intensified rather than lessened the hostility aroused. The Chinese penchant for opium was considered further proof of their alien immorality by the hard-drinking white miners.

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- 1) Yarwood, A. T. (ed) *Attitudes to Non-European Immigration* (Melbourne, Cassell Australia, 1968) p. 10.
 - 2) Wilson, R.K. *Australia's Resources and their Development* (Sydney, University of Sydney Department of Adult Education, 1980) p. 39.
 - 3) Rorke, in Yarwood (ed) p. 19; Ward, R 'Black and White Australians: race relations in history' *Australian Quarterly* Winter 1983, p. 160.

Moreover, the Chinese arrived in their largest numbers in the late 1850s just as the main Victorian gold fields were declining. The situation of increased economic competition at a time of growing scarcity is a classic recipe for resentment and scapegoating.

The final reason for hostility against the Chinese was their lack of commitment to Australia. This may seem strange given that such a large proportion of the miners were newcomers to the country, but many quickly began to look upon it as their home. There was no ambiguity about the Chinese attitude, to get as much gold as they could and return to China with it.

On several occasions, white miners attacked the Chinese, although the 'natural segregation' between the groups probably reduced the frequency of collective violence. The worst incidents occurred when there was a combination of poor economic returns and inadequate numbers of police to maintain order. The most infamous was at Lambing Flats in New South Wales in the early 1860s. The numbers who actually died were relatively small, but the unprovoked violence must have been utterly humiliating and terrifying to its victims.

There were growing pressures on the colonial governments: to stop the expropriation of gold from Australia; to reduce the high costs of maintaining order by removing the target for disorder; and to reflect the strong sentiments among miners and other Europeans toward exclusion. The method used was selective taxation and other requirements on ships arriving with Chinese. While clearly discriminatory, it was also a measured and specific response to an immediate problem.

The decline of alluvial gold in the 1860s eased the situation as the number of Chinese dropped sharply without any official prompting. Later in the decade the colonies which had introduced the discriminatory legislation repealed it. After this hiatus in coloured immigration the focus shifted to Queensland. Most dramatically, the gold found in northern Queensland in the 1870s brought an 'invasion' of about 17,000 Chinese in two and a half years, so that the North Queensland population consisted of approximately equal numbers of Chinese and Europeans. The other significant issue was the importation of 'Kanakas', South Pacific Islanders who had been 'blackbirded' (kidnapped) to work on plantations in semi-slave conditions. Queensland's chronic population shortage and the desire to develop the potential of cotton and sugar cane plantations led to a long campaign for both the introduction of 'coolies' from India and of Kanakas. Political struggles over these questions continued in Queensland for some decades but finally resulted in the triumph of exclusionary policies.

The second and decisive period of discriminatory controls and mounting pressures for racial exclusion dated from the late 1870s, and had found legislative expression in all six

4) See eg Yarwood, A. T. and Knowling *Race Relations in Australia* (Sydney, Methuen Australia, 1982).

colonies by the end of the 1880s.⁵⁾ While there were particular exceptions, numbers and economic competition are clearly insufficient to explain the upsurge in discrimination. In Australia, New Zealand, California and British Columbia, all of whom had adopted anti-Chinese measures by the end of the 1880s, there was a total increase in the European population between 1870 and 1890 of around 2 million (or more than doubling), while the total increase in Chinese was only 44,000.⁶⁾ Discriminatory legislation was also enacted even in colonies where the numbers of Chinese had been declining.

Australian pressure for anti-Chinese measures was clearly rising in tandem with nationalist sentiment, climaxing in the agreements at the Intercolonial Conference of 1888. The new legislation contrasted with the measures of the 1850s in basic respects: it was no longer aimed at a particular social and economic problem, but at a total prohibition. The very use of the term 'White Australia', which gathered popularity in the 1880s, showed how national identity had become linked with racial purity. Once this nexus was joined, the political forces for blanket exclusionary measures were virtually understained. With no significant voice in opposition, political expedience and growing patriotism combined to destroy any semblance of proportion or qualification in the increasingly fierce rhetoric. In the total momentum which developed, the validity of individual arguments (hygenic, eugenic, economic, moral, cultural or whatever) or the consistency between them were irrelevant. (The Chinese were damned both for their segregationist tendencies and for the dangers of miscegnation and intermixing, for example.) 'Racial unity is essential for national unity'⁷⁾ became an unquestioned foundation of the new country.

THE POLICY INTACT, 1901-1945

When the six Australian colonies became one independent nation in 1901, the first substantial act of the new national Parliament was to introduce the Restrictive Immigration Act, popularly known as the White Australia Policy. All members of Parliament agreed on the principle of aiming for a racially homogeneous nation, but there was some dispute over the methods to achieve the aim. The device finally adopted was a 'dictation test' where intending immigrants had to prove their literacy by writing down dictation in a specified language. The main reason the dictation test was introduced

5) See Price, Charles A. *The Great White Walls Are Built. Restrictive Immigration in North America and Australia, 1836-1888.* (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1974) esp p. 186ff.

6) Price p. 228.

7) London, H. I. *Non-White Immigration and the 'White Australia' Policy.* (Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1970) p. 7. Price Ch 10 carefully considers the validity of different supporting arguments. Coloured immigration was not often a live issue in the politics of the 1890s and some individual colonies occasionally departed from some aspects. See eg Yarwood and Knowling p. 231-3.

was to placate Britain, who was concerned that an explicitly racial bar would be seen as insulting by its increasingly important ally, Japan. The apparently racially neutral dictation test would not be so objectionable.⁸⁾

In Australia, there was never the slightest pretence that the purpose was other than to exclude any unwanted immigrant, principally Asian. The dictation test gave enormous discretion to the officials administering it, which could easily lead to individual resentments and the exercise of discrimination.⁹⁾ Potentially it was also open to political abuse, to exclude anyone the government did not want. The most brazen case occurred in the 1930s, when Egon Kisch a leading European socialist intellectual was given the test in Scottish Gaelic!¹⁰⁾

For its first four decades the White Australia Policy was very successful in achieving its aims. The number of Asians in Australia declined markedly: from about 47,000 in 1901 to about 23,000 in 1947, from 1.25% of the population to 0.21%.¹¹⁾ The number of Chinese in Australia peaked at 38,500 in 1880 and then continually dropped to a low-point of 12,094 in 1947, after which it began to rise again.¹²⁾ The policy continued to be supported by an unchallenged national consensus, and posed a minimum of administrative problems.

In international politics the policy rarely became an issue. Most Asian countries were still colonised by Europe, or while formally independent (eg Thailand, China) had little capacity or inclination to concern themselves with such distant matters. There is some irony in the fact that the main target of the policy were the Chinese, but the main opposition came from India and Japan, both of whom found such racially inspired legislation nationally insulting. The protests from India, which was still a colony, were easily contained. The numbers involved were small, and as fellow members of the British Empire, both parties were willing to reach an amicable accommodation.

Japan loomed as a larger problem. Notwithstanding her alliance with Britain, 'no issue produced more concern of tension for Australasians than the rise of Japan as an industrial-military power.'¹³⁾ With the combination of imperial subservience and racist rigidity that marked Australia's responses to Asia through this era, there was no active translation of that concern into a search for possible accommodations directly with Japan.

8) Nairn, in Yarwood (ed) p. 75.

9) An account of the 'dictation test' is in Palfreeman, A. C. *The Administration of the White Australia Policy* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1967) p. 81-85. In fact its use was rare. Only 242 immigrants were excluded using the dictation test between 1927 and 1956, of whom only one sixth were non-European. (p. 149)

10) eg Yarwood and Knowling p. 235; Pullan, Robert *Guilty Secrets. Free Speech in Australia*. (Sydney, Methuen, 1984) p. 161-3.

11) Palfreeman p. 151.

12) *ibid* p. 143, 145.

13) McQueen, Humphrey *A New Britannia* (Rev ed, Melbourne, Penguin, 1976) p. 68.

Australia's fears about Japanese immigration were not baseless: the feeling that Japanese would prove unassimilable into Australian society and that their essential loyalties would remain elsewhere; the suspicion that Japan was searching for new territories to use emigration to combat its perceived problem of over-population; the potential for Japanese minorities to become a source of friction in bilateral relations, as had occurred with the USA. All these had some substance.¹⁴⁾

But the fundamental weakness of Australia's position was the inability to appreciate Japanese viewpoints, or to conceive that compromises acceptable to both governments might have been possible. One historian has concluded 'that the history of Japan's negotiations with Australia (as with the United States) over the right of entry indicates that immigration per se was never regarded by the Japanese as a national interest, but that exclusion inevitably raised the question of prestige, which was a national interest. ... Provided Japan's face was saved by a treaty recognition of equality with the European countries in the right of entry, she would concede the substance.'¹⁵⁾

The one major international confrontation over the White Australia policy during this period occurred between Australia and Japan at the Versailles Peace Conference, following World War One. Australia was suspicious that Japan could exploit Britain's gratitude for its help during the war to secure concessions which were against Australian interests. The two had already clashed over the issue of control of Germany's Pacific territories, and Japanese behaviour in China during the war aroused Australian concern.

Japan proposed a racial equality clause for the proposed League of Nations. The opposition was led by the Australian Prime Minister, Billy Hughes. Hughes' style was abrasive and dogmatic, causing a maximum of offence to Japan, but was domestically popular in Australia, where he was seen to be promoting the interests of the young nation on the international stage. President Wilson finally declared the clause defeated because there was not unanimity on its acceptability, even though a majority of nations supported it

Hughes' apparent victory and domestic political kudos carried considerable diplomatic costs. President Wilson was able to blame Hughes and Australia for the motion's failure, a highly convenient stratagem for him. Wilson was caught between the domestic opposition supporting such a clause would have produced in America and the wish to avoid giving offence to Japan. Blaming Australia provided an ideal scapegoat. Hughes finally recognised this, referring to Wilson privately as Mr Facing-both-ways, and belatedly trying to repair some of the damage with Japan his intransigence and out-spokenness had incurred.¹⁶⁾

14) eg Yarwood and Knowling p. 242-248.

15) Sissons, D. C. S 'Immigration in Australian-Japanese Relations, 1871-1971.' in Stockwin, J. A. A. (ed) *Japan and Australia in the Seventies* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1972) p. 149-5.

16) Spartalis, Peter *The Diplomatic Battles of Billy Hughes* (Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1983) p. 169.

Hughes' main fear was that the clause would be used to challenge the White Australia Policy, 'the corner stone of the national edifice.'¹⁷⁾ There is no doubting the sincerity of Hughes' passion. In the margin of his copy of (British Prime Minister) Lloyd George's book, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties*, opposite the brief paragraph on racial equality, (Hughes wrote) "To L-G a grain of sand, to W. M. H (ie Hughes) Mt Everest"¹⁸⁾. Indeed it was the strength of his conviction which produced his inflexibility. Although the Japanese delegates refused to explicitly exempt immigration questions, their main concern was with their national 'face' and recognition. But exploration of alternatives which might have met both nations' interests was a low priority to the Australian Prime Minister. As another Australian delegate, Sir John Latham, wrote 'the principle of White Australia is almost a religion in Australia. ... Any surrender of the policy is inconceivable.'¹⁹⁾ Hughes was more interested in maintaining the faith than in finding face-saving formulas or avoiding offence to the infidels.

RESISTANCE AND CHANGE, 1945-73.

The impact of World War Two on Australian immigration policies was profound and double-edged. The national crisis helped prompt Australia to undertake a programme of massive population growth through immigration. On the other hand the experience of the war had strongly reinforced sentiment in favour of a White Australia. Japan's military aggression seemed to confirm the fears of half a century, and the cruelty and barbarism of Japanese behaviour were taken as evidence for the necessity of keeping Australia white. (Of the 34,376 Australians killed in the war, 8,031, almost a quarter, died cruel and unnecessary deaths in the inhumane conditions of Japanese Prisoner of War camps.)²⁰⁾

Surprisingly, the immediate post-war years produced several controversies concerning the issue. Despite the strong national consensus behind the policy's aims, Australia's first Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, managed to generate a series of incidents through his rigid and inhumane administration. There were two main groups involved. The first were refugees who had come to Australia to escape from the fighting or from the Japanese invaders. The overwhelming majority voluntarily returned to their own countries after the war. But a small proportion wanted to remain. Some had married and formed families in Australia, others had become settled and accustomed to life there,

17) Yarwood and Knowling p. 246.

18) Spertalis p. 191.

19) London p. 205-6. See also Edwards, P. G. *Prime Ministers and Diplomats. The Making of Australian Foreign Policy 1901-1949*. (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 42f.

20) Millar, T. B. *Australia in Peace and War. External Relations 1788-1977*. (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1978) p. 159.

while still others simply wanted the greater economic opportunities. The second main group were Japanese women who had married Australian servicemen, during the Occupation.

Calwell seemed determined not to allow a single Asian to remain in the country. This course was irrational even within his own goals. The numbers involved were relatively small, and neither group constituted a precedent which would allow future large-scale immigration. However Calwell seemed to believe that the national homogeneity of a country of 7 million could be destroyed by a few hundred. His extreme and provocative rhetoric ('I will not allow these Japanese women to pollute Australian shores') and the inhumanity of his actions drew domestic protests and attracted international attention.

There is no attitudinal or logical inconsistency between the strong support for the general principle of a White Australia and the strength of the domestic protests against the administration of the policy. The key distinction is between the deportation of known individuals and the prospect of invasion by anonymous alien hordes. The greatest public controversy was over cases which involved the Asian spouse of an Australian or where enforcement of the policy led to families being separated. It was impossible to conjure a threat from Asians infiltrating the country through matrimony, and expulsion of an individual was more controversial and visible than the blocked entry of many through abstract laws.

Legislation based upon a porous concept like race, and with so many technicalities, always had the potential to generate administrative embarrassments. While there had²¹⁾ been occasional problems before the war, these never developed into major controversies. It took the temperament of Calwell and the peculiar post-war situation to produce a profusion.²²⁾

The defeat of the ALP Government in December 1949 brought no change in basic policy. Neither did the new Menzies Government seek to clarify the legislation or principles which had produced the incidents. But the new Minister, Holt, adopted a more flexible attitude to individual cases and this approach proved politically effective. With less provocative implementation, no legislative initiatives and the anomalies of the immediate post-war situation naturally easing with time, the White Australia Policy largely

21) See Yarwood and Knowling p. 238f on the Poon Goey Affair.

22) On this period see eg London; Yarwood (ed) p. 116, Palfreeman. Calwell was a more complex character than these attitudes suggest. He probably had closer relations with the Chinese communities resident in Australia than any other politician. On the matter of the Japanese brides, Sissons observed 'the contrast between the long and disheartening struggle fought by the husbands and their well-wishers (to enable their entrance with) the ready acceptance of the brides by the Australian community.' (p. 205). Similarly, the story of the Chinese community in Australia is very much a success story. See Choi, C. Y *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*. (Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1975); Inglis, Christine 'Chinese in Australia' in Edgar, D (ed) *Social Change in Australia* (Melbourne, Cheshire, 1973); Rivett, Kenneth (ed) *Australia and the Non-White Migrant*. (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1975) p. 184f.

disappeared from public attention.²³⁾

The aim of maintaining a quiet neglect towards the issue became more difficult from the late 1950s when pressure groups began actively lobbying for change. Various groups of liberal opinion had become increasingly affronted by the inhumanity and/or the diplomatic damage caused by the policy. Groups in the churches who saw the policy as a denial of the universality of the Christian gospel were one strand. Immigration Reform Associations, consisting largely of academics and civil libertarians, mounted highly articulate closely reasoned critiques. In the short term the most visible and vocal were the Student Action groups, who with great gusto and imagination, mounted demonstrations and disruptions to draw attention to the policy.²⁴⁾

Public opinion had shown some dramatic changes. In the late 1940s, a clear majority opposed admitting any non-Europeans. From 1959 on polls invariably found a majority rejecting this option in favour of limited entry.²⁵⁾ By 1964, 78% favoured limited entry. The question counterposes an extreme option (complete exclusion) with a very mild one (limited entry), but the change recorded is still stark.

The decade 1956-65 can be characterised as small liberalizations by stealth. Minor changes which made the policy more flexible or less offensive were introduced without changing its basic thrust. These small changes (eg some provisions for long-term Asian residents, or the 1958 abolition of the dictation test) were typically executed with a minimum of publicity.

The decisive obstacle to more significant change was the prime Minister. Menzies' political position was one of almost complete dominance—the longest serving Prime Minister in Australian history, apparently electorally invincible and within the Liberal Party completely unchallenged. Menzies was as implacably opposed to any significant change as Arthur Calwell. As has often been noted, Menzies' basic attachments were to Britain, and, of necessity, to America. He quite simply was insensitive to Asian opinion, and did not take the emerging countries of the Third World seriously. This basic orientation was manifested not only in his intransigence on the White Australia Policy, but by his support for South Africa in the British Commonwealth and the United Nations. Indeed with utter diplomatic stupidity, he explicitly coupled attacks on apartheid with the possibility of attacks on Australian immigration policy. Menzies remained completely unrepentant in these attitudes, recounting with pride in his memoirs Dr Verwoerd's opinion that 'you are seen by all shades of opinion as perhaps the best friend South Africa has.'²⁶⁾

23) On the period 1950-56, see London, Palfreeman.

24) London Ch 5 outlines pressure group activity. For the views of the Immigration Reform Association in the 1970s, see Rivett, especially Preface and Ch 1.

25) London p. 151.

26) Quoted, Menzies, R. G. *Afternoon Light* (Melbourne, Cassell Australia, 1967) p. 202.

The inter-regnum between Menzies' retirement and the Whitlam Labor Government brought more significant liberalization, but within a general context of confusion and denial. Two months after Menzies' retirement, in March 1966, Immigration Minister Opperman announced important changes. The new Prime Minister, Holt, was receptive, partly because of his greater awareness of Asian opinion. The climate for change had been aided by some recent debacles, most notably the Nancy Prasad deportation. A young Fijian girl had become the focus of intense publicity and protest in a spiralling saga. Her parents had themselves unsuccessfully sought to emigrate to Australia, claiming they had an oral assurance they could do so. When they were expelled they sought to have their youngest daughter adopted by her older brother, who by marriage was already an Australian citizen. The Government's decision to deport her was officially correct but the case had highlighted the absurdities and invidiousness of the general policy.

The major and finally irresistible force for change throughout this period was that international trends were undermining the policy. There was a growing contradiction between Australia's foreign policy and trade interests and its immigration policy. Most Asian countries were now independent, and especially sensitive to policies which hinted at white racial superiority or discrimination. The composition of international bodies such as the British Commonwealth and the United Nations, had been transformed so that Third World countries now constituted the majority.

There were growing diplomatic and security links with Asia: Australia had fought with Koreans against North Koreans, was fighting to support the South Vietnamese Government, had fought with the Malaysian Government against communist insurgents and later against the threat of Indonesian confrontation; and was a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as well as defence alliances with Malaysia and Singapore. It was increasingly absurd to embrace these countries as vital allies, but to simultaneously maintain their citizens were unfit to be immigrants. Similarly Australia's trade links with Asia were increasingly important. From 1966 Japan replaced Britain as the biggest market for Australian exports. It was equally absurd to say 'you are good enough to be our customers, but not to have equal rights to immigrate.' Less directly, there were growing humanitarian and educational links: thousands of Asian students studying in Australia, academic exchanges, aid projects etc. The human relationships forged in these processes were also important in facilitating change.

Moreover, there was ample evidence that the policy was causing resentment. The Philippines was most vocal, while Japan was also clearly affronted. (When I first visited the Philippines in 1971, I was shocked when asked questions which referred to Australia's policy as 'apartheid'.) Even where there was not active protest the policy was clearly diminishing Australia's international reputation, making it appear a colonial relic out of touch with the modern world and its region. Some criticisms were unfair, and

others were based on completely unrealistic expectations. One example of the latter was the Indian High Commissioner to Australia, who claimed in 1954 that Australian immigration policy was 'driving 440 million from India and Pakistan away from the British Commonwealth and into the arms of Communism. You have a welfare state, yet 1,000 million people throughout the world cannot get a square meal a day.'²⁷⁾ It was hardly within the grasp of Australian immigration policy to solve such problems.

To sum up the politics of White Australia in the years 1956-72, there were constantly growing pressures for change, but the Government response was marked by delay and indecision. The reason lay in the confusing array of pressures the Government confronted, and toward which it was unable to construct a coherent stance. Significant pressure group activity came from both sides of the issue. Public opinion was ambivalent: increasingly uncomfortable with claims to racial superiority or exclusivity, there was even more uneasiness about abolishing restrictive measures. As the language of the period had it, there was always a majority opposed to 'opening the flood gates'.

The confusions in Australian society were mirrored in the major political parties. Both exhibited a similar generation gap which public opinion surveys revealed, with younger politicians more likely to favour a break from the past. In the Labor Party where such policy deliberations were more visible, organized and self-conscious, the culmination of a series of changes in the party platform came in 1971 with a positive commitment to abolish all forms of racial discrimination. The issue crossed normal factional lines in the party. The pressure for change was led by the coming generation of leaders such as Whitlam, Dunstan and Cairns, and opposed by the older generation such as Calwell and Daly. A similar but less articulated and more confused change was underway in the Liberals, perhaps reaching its zenith in 1970-71 when then Prime Minister Gorton made some ambiguous remarks about Australia one day becoming a multi-racial society, a concept which had been embraced by one of his Ministers, Chipp, but opposed by others. In characteristic fashion, Gorton first seemed to welcome the idea and then disown it.²⁸⁾ Differences within the parties were greater than differences between them.

The issue was always emotionally charged, and the uncertainty about how to change amid the conflicting pressures produced a policy paralysis, while official rhetoric became increasingly inconsistent. The very term White Australia Policy, once proudly proclaimed, was gradually abandoned in favour of an embarrassed and inarticulate silence. Euphemisms like maintaining homogeneity became the foundation of official justifications. But what meaning did homogeneity have except a racial one? Indians and Malaysians know more about our British heritage than did the Southern Europeans whom the Government was making strenuous efforts to attract. Japanese had a higher standard

27) Quoted, London p. 193.

28) See Rivett p. 31-2.

of education and technical skills than did most other countries. The Philippines had a higher proportion of Christians, and they and many others had a ready supply of literate English speakers. If historical, educational, religious or linguistic criteria were to be used as measures of homogeneity, these Asian peoples had more claim than many of the migrants the Government was encouraging to come.

As in many other areas, it was left to the Whitlam Labor Government (1972-75) to break decisively with the shibboleths of the past. It abolished all references implying racial discrimination in all areas of legislation, including immigration. It did so in the context of limiting the total immigration intake, because of the growing problem of domestic unemployment. In effect this meant that the total numbers of migrants were to be controlled and in fact reduced from previous years, but within this reduced number racial criteria would no longer apply. The method of selection which the Government introduced for evaluating migrants was a 'points' system, based upon a similar measure which had operated in Canada, and which included criteria such as educational and technical qualifications, language ability, and personal links with Australia (such as family reunion). Although the majority of immigrants continued to be European, it is basically inaccurate to talk of a White Australia Policy after 1973.

THE POLITICS OF INDOCHINESE REFUGEES, 1975-84.

The Whitlam Government had introduced a clear change of principle, and had accomplished it relatively painlessly. Their changes had, however, only meant a relatively small increase in the numbers of Asians entering Australia. The first acute test of Australia's new immigration policies to Asia came with the crisis presented by large numbers of Indochinese refugees.

Before examining the particularities of Australia's responses to the problem, it is necessary to recall the international politics, and the causes and development, of the refugee outflow. The communist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam in April and May 1975 produced an immediate outpouring. In the next few months, about 130,000 went to the USA. After this initial burst, there was a gradual decline in the numbers leaving Vietnam. For the next few years there was a steady flow seeking to escape the barbarities of Pol Pot's Kampuchea, mostly land refugees who fled into Thailand. While the numbers were serious they were not nearly as acute as they later became.²⁹⁾

The crucial development which precipitated the enormous new exodus was the sharply declining relations between China and Vietnam. They became steadily worse in the second half of 1978, climaxing in Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea in December,

29) For total numbers of refugees, see Viviani, Nancy *The Long Journey. Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1984) Table 3.1, 3.2.

followed by a limited Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February 1979. These developments produced a huge increase in refugees for three major reasons: people wanting to escape from the fighting itself; because the new wars would mean a continuation, indeed a worsening, of economic hardship and famine in Indochina; and because the Vietnamese Government was now actively discriminating against, and treating as suspect, its ethnic Chinese population, the Hoa.

The crisis year was 1979. Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong were all especially hard hit by the huge influx of refugees, and were seeking relief from other countries. The Malaysian Government was especially vocal and hostile because most of the refugees were ethnic Chinese, and a large number could upset the delicate balance in Malaysian politics. There was also a crisis because it became apparent that there was connivance by the Vietnamese Government, or parts of it, in the exodus of refugees, that, for whatever reason, Vietnam was deliberately exporting people. In 1979, there were three ships carrying more than 2,000 people each. Such large ships, their visibility and the organization their voyage would entail, could hardly be leaving Vietnam without the foreknowledge, if not active encouragement, of the Government.

The result was a series of international conferences and negotiations, which put pressure on Vietnam to stop the refugees leaving and to initiate more orderly procedures for emigration. Other countries were urged to accept more refugees from the countries of first refuge in Southeast Asia. Many Western countries agreed to accept significant numbers.³⁰⁾

This brief background allows us to consider the politics of refugee intake in Australia. The issue first erupted in 1975 when the Whitlam Government only accepted a small number of refugees. This attracted considerable criticism, and was attacked as being politically motivated meanness, stemming from Labor's opposition to the war.³¹⁾

The Fraser Government, which came to power in late 1975, was somewhat more generous. The issue did not attract significant public attention again until the middle of 1977. Then the direct landing of Vietnamese refugees in Darwin became a source of concern. For the first time Australia had become a country of first refuge. The first boat people arrived in Darwin as early as April 1976, having made an amazing voyage down through the South China Sea, between the Indonesian islands and around the western edge of New Guinea, in a small boat, guided only by a page from a school atlas.³²⁾ However in 1977 several boatloads arrived, and there was a marked increase in

30) To the end of 1981, Australia had accepted 60,000, Canada 80,000, France 80,000, West Germany 20,000, UK 15,000, USA 600,000, and Japan 1,379. (Viviani Table 3.3)

31) Knopfelmacher quotes a former Whitlam Minister, Clyde Cameron (who is very hostile to Whitlam) quoting Whitlam to this effect. 'The Case against Multi-culturalism' in Manne, Robert (ed) *The New Conservatism in Australia* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 279.

32) The best description and analysis of the Vietnamese refugee saga is Viviani. See also Grant,

anti-refugee hostility. The boat people had aroused one of white Australia's most abiding fears, the threat of uncontrolled entry by Asians in large numbers. It is notable that the leadership of the major parties refrained from exploiting this hostility, but its presence was a factor which they couldn't entirely ignore.

In the year of crisis, 1979, when not only was there a great increase in numbers of refugees, but clear evidence of a devastating famine in Cambodia, vocal public opinion showed a marked increase in sympathy. Motivated also by a desire to show its harassed ASEAN neighbours that it was a good regional citizen, Australia began to take refugees in significant numbers. Since 1978, more than 80,000 Indochinese refugees have settled in Australia. Asians, and especially refugees, have formed a significant proportion of the total migrant intake in recent years, varying between 26% and 33% over the last five years and in some years total Asian immigration has numbered around 25,000.³³⁾

This dramatic increase came at an unfortunate time, in that Australia has had relatively high levels of unemployment since 1974. In 1985 the unemployment rate was still above 8%. However despite the difficult economic conditions, and despite the fact that Asian refugees were now entering the country at a rate far exceeding what anyone in the early 1970s would ever have imagined, there was surprisingly little protest or reaction. There had been some isolated incidents of violence, and complaints in some areas, and there had been some problems because of political divisions within the Vietnamese community, but none of this amounted to more significant social tensions than one must accept with such a massive relocation.

The first major public controversy over the refugees occurred in the months following March 1984, when one of Australia's most famous and distinguished historians, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, suggested that 'the pace of Asian immigration is now far ahead of public opinion' and that 'the present immigration program, if it is not looked at more carefully, could do more than anything in the last thirty years to weaken or explode (the) consensus (produced by the Hawke government).'³⁴⁾ As the controversy developed (and he was subjected to various personal smears) Blainey's statements became more extreme: that the Hawke ALP Government believed 'some kind of Asian takeover of Australia was inevitable,' that it was favouring Asians over British and Europeans, and the Asian immigration was going to be the major issue at the next election and could spell defeat for the Government, and that the Government had 'secret' plans to increase

Bruce and *The Age The Boat People* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1979). Two accounts which illuminate the refugees' experiences are Hawthorne, Lesleyanne (ed) *Refugee. The Vietnamese Experience* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1982) and Poussard, Wendy *Today is a Real Day. Indochinese Refugees in Australia*. (Melbourne, Dove Communications, 1981)

33) See eg *The Financial Times* 19 November 1984 Australia supplement. Systematic figures are available from the Australian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

34) Blainey, Geoffrey *All for Australia* (Sydney, Methuen Haynes, 1984) p. 25.

Asian immigration.³⁵⁾

Blainey's remarks elicited a variety of responses. Clearly his intervention had crystallized latent tensions and diffuse doubts. Public opinion polls gave some support to his contentions, showing especially that many thought all immigration should be more limited at present.³⁶⁾ However such indicators of public opinion are a far cry from serious social tensions or communal violence.

The strength of the controversy was greatly fuelled when the Opposition Liberal spokesman on Immigration, Hodgeman, supported Blainey, and the Leader of the Opposition, Peacock, seemed to be following a similar route. For the first time, Asian immigration threatened to become a partisan issue, where the Liberals, whose political fortunes were then at their nadir, might seek to inflame racial prejudice in order to attack the Government. After some damaging indecision, the Opposition Leader distanced himself from his Immigration spokesman. The controversy raged for several months, and during that time there was an upsurge in racist incidents, but immigration did not become an election issue, when Australians went to the polls in December 1984. Given the almost identical policies pursued by the Fraser and Hawke Governments, it would have been difficult for the Opposition to be too critical, even apart from the obvious divisions within its own ranks. Despite Michael Hodgeman's efforts, Australian politics fortunately still lacks its Enoch Powell or George Wallace. However one of Australia's leading political commentators, Max Walsh, observed at the end of 1970s that 'no senior politician in Australia would contemplate publicly delivering a remark that could be construed as racist.'³⁷⁾ That unfortunately is no longer true.

The situation is still in the balance. It is too early to say whether this major new ethnic community in Australia will prosper and integrate without hindrance, or whether it will be the occasion of further controversy or unrest. The controversy following the Blainey episode has subsided. But in a time of economic stress, debate should and will continue about the appropriate level of immigration.³⁸⁾ It is unfortunately inevitable that

35) See eg Blainey p. 29; Peter Bowers *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 June 1984; Jack Waterford *Canberra Times* 5, 8 October 1984; Kristin Williamson *National Times* 22 March 1985.

36) A McNair-Anderson Gallup Poll in May 1984 found 62% who disapproved of the increasing proportion of immigration coming from Asia, and 64% thought the original target figure of 90,000 migrants in 1984 was too high (Quoted, editorial *The Age* 22 May 1984). A Morgan Gallup poll in June 1984 found 62% who thought the revised migrant intake of 72,000 was still too high; and 59% who thought the projected intake of 24,000 Asians was too high. *The Bulletin* 17 July 1984.

37) Walsh, Maximilian *Poor Little Rich Country* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1979) p. 12.

38) The most sustained and cogent case for a reduced immigration intake is argued by Robert and Tania Birrell *An Issue of People. Population and Australian Society*. (Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1981). For a good exposition of different views in the debate see Birrell, R et al (eds) *Refugees, Resources, Reunions: Australia's Immigration Dilemmas* (Melbourne, V. C. T. A. Publishing, 1979)

its conduct will not always be edifying. For that debate to be framed in terms of the 'Asianization' of Australia is neither realistic nor desirable. Australia's links with Asia are now profound and irreversible. In some ways the current anti-refugee rhetoric echoes themes which have been constant in Australian history. But when the target of attack is now an officially condoned 'Asian takeover' of Australia, no matter how imaginary, it is a measure of the distance Australia has travelled since the days of total exclusion.