

To Discriminate or to Populate? Dismantling White Australia

The content of a presentation delivered by Dr Zachary Gorman, Historian at the Robert Menzies Institute, February 2024

This presentation on the topic of immigration and the White Australia policy encompasses much more than the Menzies's era's 1949-66 span. The point of this presentation is to conceptualise the issue in big picture terms - as a long running debate, with roots deep in the 19th century, and one which in many respects is still ongoing. It's easy with a topic like this to get caught up in key dates, such as the foundation of the Department of Immigration in 1945, or the 1966 migration review which effectively ended the bulk of White Australia. But too large an emphasis on these dates tends to distort the picture, by making it seem like there were long periods of continuity and then changes which happened overnight, when instead it was more of a gradual and constant evolution, very much driven by the need to resolve competing imperatives. And developing this understanding fits in perfectly with the VCE curriculum's focus on continuity and change.

This presentation will argue that the two central competing imperatives that have driven debate over immigration are the conservative imperative to protect Australia's wealth and successful society, and the progressive imperative to expand and adapt in order to build on that prosperity and successful society. Or to put it in the terms of the title, whether Australians should discriminate i.e. shelter or hoard their wealth, land, and social cohesion; or populate i.e. risk trying to grow their wealth, develop the land, and ultimately diversify. In the end, Australians have always wanted a bit of both, and shorn of the once overt racism, this balancing act continues to drive debates around immigration even in the present day.

To show how deep the roots of this debate go, I would argue that these competing imperatives first emerge in the early 19th century when it became clear that Australia had great resources and economic potential particularly when it came to the wool industry. The dream of Australia's future wealth and growth was very captivating such that the first book ever written by an Australian born author was deliberately designed to attract the migrants necessary to make that dream a reality. That book was the awkwardly titled volume you can see on the screen, published by prominent landowner William Wentworth in 1819.

There was a great deal of truth in the dream. High quality Australian wool could fetch an incredibly high price on the export market, and because the labour necessary to run sheep stations and the associated industry was scarce, Australia's workers were able to attract some of the highest wages in the world at the time, helping to turn Australia into what became known as the 'working man's paradise'. So the early tension is between those who want migration to expand the wool industry, generally the big landowners, and the workers who realise that their scarcity is their strength, and who don't want their wages undermined by competitors.

Such were the high wages that a worker could make in Australia, that eventually Britain had to hit pause on sending convicts here because it had ceased to be seen a punishment, since once a convict's sentence was up they were likely to earn much more here than they ever could have in England.

However, by the late 1840s an economic downturn led to a slowing in the number of free migrants coming to our shores, & since they were not meeting the requirements of leading businessmen, those men began to advocate bringing back the convicts who under the assignment system could work their farms virtually for free. When a new convict ship did turn up in 1849, this led to a popular backlash in the campaign of the Anti-Transportation Leagues, which was the first political campaign to unite the colonies, and which forced the British to back down and permanently end convict transportation outside of Western Australia, and even grant the colonies their own Parliaments and a great degree of self-government which started in most colonies including Victoria in 1856.

So the point is that debates around immigration were there at the very birth of Australian democracy and were arguably a catalyst for that birth. Moreover, many of the attacks that would later be thrown at non-white immigrants saw a dress rehearsal in being thrown at convicts. These include: the idea that convicts would undercut wages, that they were inherently inferior, that they would undermine social cohesion, and even make democracy unworkable. And famously the impulse to hoard Australia's wealth would also flare up in racial incidents on the goldfields almost simultaneously with the convict issue being resolved.

But before we move on from the 19th century there is one more thing to note which is pertinent to the story. That is that colonial Australia did have a significant element of pluralism to it, as while it may have been extremely white it was made up of people from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales who did bring with them their own fiercely competing strands of Christianity. And unlike in England at the time, where the Church of England was legally established, so it received money from the taxpayer, had special seats in the House of Lords and there were certain jobs you could only do if you were Anglican, in Australia from the 1830s all Christian denominations were treated on an equal basis. So that was an early example of diversity being respected and assimilation not being pursued, because it was calculated that enforcing uniformity would cause more social distress than having uniformity would prevent. More than a century later, a similar conclusion would finally be realised when it came to issues of race and culture.

Coming to the early 20th century, many people have heard that implementing a White Australia was one of the main arguments in the campaign for federation, and that the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act was one of the first pieces of legislation the Commonwealth ever passed. This turn of events was driven by a number of factors, including the 'Tyranny of Distance' in which Australians felt themselves to be a British community isolated from Britain and liable to lose its British character if they let in migrants more geographically proximate to Australia. In the aftermath of the American Civil War and other events in continental Europe, there was also an assumption that racial or ethnic diversity would lead to conflict.

But when considering the equally important economic justification for White Australia, very popular amongst trade unionists at the time, it is important to note the context: that federation came out of the 1890s during which Australians experienced a severe economic depression which made them extremely self-conscious about protecting their jobs and their wages from competition. The balance of whether to grow or to consolidate was thus tilted strongly towards the latter.

Like with convict transportation, the competition accused of undercutting jobs and wages often took very unsavoury forms, particularly in the way in which Pacific Islanders were essentially captured and forcibly made to work the farms of far north Queensland, in a system many both then and since have compared to slavery. But there was also just a common assumption that any non-white person was likely to work for less pay than a white man.

Individual colonies had been passing racially discriminatory immigration policies since at least the 1880s, but federation was a way to ensure that they would cover the whole continent – and bring the North Queenslanders into line. These earlier pieces of legislation had been upfront in who they were targeted at, generally people from China, but the commonwealth opted for the deceptive and arbitrary tool of the dictation test – in which a person would be asked to write 50 words in any European language.

The reason for this device was that despite Australians trying to ensure they were purely British, the British were actually embarrassed by Australia's immigration policy which went against the somewhat cosmopolitan nature of the Empire by barring 'Her Majesty's Indian Subjects' as well antagonising potential allies like Japan. On paper, the dictation test only discriminated on the basis of education, and even though it was an open secret that this was not how it would be applied, this was enough to appease the British who still had the legal power to overturn legislation passed by the Commonwealth Parliament.

In advocating for federation, people had also used the argument that Australia needed to coordinate its defences, particularly in light of German activity in the South Pacific, but the scale only started to tip back towards expansion with changing geopolitical circumstances. The first of which was the victory of Japan in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, which alarmed many people because it disproved the racist assumption that Asians were inherently inferior to whites and that they could not best Europeans in a military conflict. The second change was of course the world war itself, but this came on too quickly for any changes to be made to immigration policy until its aftermath.

The 1920s was the decade in which Australia really tried to have its cake and eat it too when it came to immigration policy. Before the Wall Street crash, there was a great deal of prosperity, which meant that the ordinary person was not nearly as fearful of migrant competition as they had been a couple of decades earlier. But the Bruce Government hoped to combine a vast expansion of population with keeping the country exclusively British. Under a policy dubbed 'men, money, markets', the Bruce Government borrowed heavily for national development and closer settlement projects aiming to bring out Britons to work on farms, with the produce being sold back to the mother country under imperial preference tariff arrangements.

In London, the Australian High Commissioner and former prime minister Joseph Cook, who had grown up in terrible poverty in England before making a success of himself in Australia, coined the slogan that Australia was the 'Land of the Better Chance' – and this became the basis for a very large-scale marketing campaign targeting potential British settlers. This sales-pitch worked to a significant extent, and there was a net gain of 340,000 immigrants over the decade.

But when the Great Depression hit, all that borrowing came back to bite Australia with a vengeance. Schemes of assisted passage were wound up, and in the dire economic circumstances the general public became averse to even white migration, let alone non-white. The profound impact of the economic disaster on people's lives meant that a new hoarder mentality set in, not just for the decade but in a manner which shaped people's viewpoints for the rest of their lives.

The 1930s were also notable for a couple of other reasons. One was the use of the dictation test for political purposes, particularly in an attempt to bar communist Egon Kisch from entering the country. A well-educated man, he knew several European languages, hence customs officials asked him to sit the test in Scots Gaelic, leading to a High Court case which had to decide whether Gaelic was indeed a European language. This was an incident which highlighted both the farcical nature of the test and its potential misuse.

The second reason was an important precedent for the post-war changes in migration policy, when in December 1938 Prime Minister Joseph Lyons agreed to accept 15,000 refugees following the Nazi annexation of a large portion of Czechoslovakia. *The Sydney Morning Herald* spoke in very positive terms that 'The ill wind of Nazi tyranny may blow this country good by providing her with those fresh resources of skill, intelligence, character, and culture embodied in the expatriates of Europe' – showing that a universally negative backlash against the admittance of non-Britons was not inevitable.

But while this was a momentous event, the heightened anti-immigrant feeling to which I've referred combined with additional antisemitism to ensure that it came extremely late in the day. There were also administrative delays caused by an insistence that refugees should be quote 'absorbed into the Australian community without affecting living standards and without detrimental effect to Australian workers'. Tragically in the end less than half the places offered would be filled before the outbreak of conflict.

As I'm sure you know, World War Two and the very real threat of Japanese invasion changed the terms of the debate, making the government far more aware of the importance of growing Australia's population in order for us to have the manpower to defend ourselves. The catchcry of populate or perish, which was three decades old, now became more urgent and ubiquitous in public discourse.

An important publication which helped to shape this debate was *The Myth of Open Spaces*. Published in 1942, this used demographic studies to prove that after the war Britain would no longer have the surplus population to continue to provide Australia with migrants in significant quantities. Because of this, the author and later leading public servant William Forsyth, argued that Australia would have to accept people from Eastern and Southern Europe if we were to get the extra people we so desperately desired.

But while it was easy for an academic to make such an argument, it was a much harder task for politicians to sell to an electorate deeply indoctrinated in the dogma of White Australia, and still holding onto the mentality of scarcity from the Depression. This quote from a radio broadcast delivered in April 1943 shows Menzies as a politician trying to bring the electorate on board for what was a momentous change. It acknowledges the common assumption that there would be a social and industrial cost to broadening migration ie the conservative imperative, but argues that not only is the reward worth the risk, but that Australia was already a melting pot of the different peoples who inhabited the British Isles.

Menzies's speech came a year before the Curtin Cabinet began discussing changing Australia's immigration policy, and the fact that this move had bipartisan support was crucial to its success. It greatly dampened the potential for a populist backlash that an opportunistic politician could easily have led. Indeed, I would argue that this was a top-down change made by leaders concerned with Australia's strategic needs. It did not have a clear groundswell of grassroots support, and the way in which the change was implemented, above all in the policy of assimilation, needs to be understood in that context.

Australia's leaders also realised that not only had the war made the need for population apparent, but it also created a unique opportunity to get large numbers of Europeans to come to Australia, because there were literally millions of displaced persons dislocated by the conflict and looking for new homes. While 170,000 DPs would relocate to Australia between 1947 and 1954, this great surplus allowed the first Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell to be choosy in how he publicly initiated the new wave of migration he planned on ushering in.

He hand-picked a group of 843 migrants from the Northern European States of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, who were sold to the public in a propaganda campaign as the 'Beautiful Balts'. The point being that they were clearly white, and would therefore not be perceived as a threat either culturally or in terms of wages. As Calwell later explained:

'We would bring one shipload with nobody under fifteen and nobody over thirty-five, all of whom had to be single ... Many were red-headed and blue-eyed. There was also a number of natural platinum blondes of both sexes. The men were handsome and the women beautiful. It was not hard to sell immigration to the Australian people once the press published photographs of that group.'

While whiteness was seen as a selling point, as you can see in this photograph of Calwell meeting a woman deliberately dressed in cultural garb, the extent to which the official policy of assimilation meant that migrants were meant to discard all of their heritage has sometimes been exaggerated.

But what was more extreme was Calwell's implementation of the rest of the White Australia Policy, which he not only believed in but enforced with a deliberate vigour to assuage the public of any fears that they were experiencing too radical a change. He instituted a number of highly publicised deportations of non-white refugees who had entered Australia during the war, and was strict in blocking Australian occupation forces in Japan from bringing home Japanese wives. Two deportations which captured the media spotlight included that of Lorenzo Gamboa, a Filipino who had entered Australia as a member of the US armed forces, married an Australian and fathered two children with her. The other was that of Frank Yang, a North Queensland potato farmer who had lived in Australia for 19 years. Both decisions would be overturned by the Menzies Government when it came to power.

Another way in which Calwell sort to reassure the public was by insisting that Australia would remain overwhelmingly British, and that any European migrants would be more than matched by the number coming out from the mother country, or as he put it quote 'for every foreign migrant there will be ten from the United Kingdom'. He was responsible for the 1948 Nationality and Citizenship Bill, which created the category of Australian citizenship as distinct from British citizenship, and also brought in the long-standing tradition of holding citizenship ceremonies around January 26. But even when introducing this Bill, Calwell insisted that it would not do anything to detract from the government's policy of giving legal preference to British migrants.

They were induced to come out to Australia under a subsidy scheme in which an adult would only be charged £10 for passage to Australia, with children travelling free. Combined with more luxurious accommodation on the ships themselves, this meant that the Australian Government had to bear a far greater cost to secure a British migrant than they did for a non-British migrant, which ended up being a telling factor in the government gradually allowing the ratio of British to non-British to skew more and more towards the latter. The government also came up with a cost saving scheme which sort to get the public to alleviate the expense via a 'Bring out a Briton' campaign, where Australian families were encouraged to help house and find jobs for British migrants.

Non-British migrants faced far harsher conditions when it came to accommodation and employment on arriving in Australia, but there was likewise a significant effort put into enlisting the public in helping to settle them. From 1950, the Australian Government held an Annual Australian Citizenship Convention which brought together a range of community and Church groups to help assist migrants with the process of assimilation. Likewise, there was the Good Neighbour Movement, a grassroots network of organisations engaged in the same enterprise.

Once again, a central purpose of the Citizenship Conventions and the Good Neighbour Movement was to assuage the fears of the public, and propagandise how migrants were successfully becoming 'New Australians'. For this reason, they have often been criticised by historians for failing to meet, or even fully consider the needs of migrants. However, they did serve an important purpose, and this was the only reason the government was willing to spend large sums of money on them. In 1952 the Federal Treasurer Arthur Fadden tried to cut the Citizenship Convention from the budget, only to be told by Immigration Minister Harold Holt that there was quote 'still too much anti-immigration and anti-alien sentiment to abandon the best weapon we have yet found to combat it'.

The policy of assimilation more broadly might be understood in these terms. While the people designing the policy genuinely thought that migrants needed to speak English and become part of a common culture in order for Australian society to remain cohesive, they also understood that this was the best way to get the Australian public to accept them.

That process of acceptance was greatly facilitated by the fact that the 1950s proved to be a period of extended prosperity and full employment, hence the traditional fears of migrants taking jobs or undercutting wages began to dissipate. Indeed, apart from one or two hiccups, Australia would not face a major economic downturn until the 1970s, and it is no coincidence that the process of dismantling White Australia took place within that timeframe. Had there been a recession or depression, it is much more likely that a major populist backlash might have flared up.

With these fortuitous circumstances, the need to assuage the public began to dissipate, and the Citizenship Conventions reflected this. By the late 1950s they talked less about being British and more about simply being Australian. They likewise started to have migrant groups directly represented in their proceedings. By 1959 they stopped talking about a goal of complete assimilation and instead spoke of the milder 'integration', ie that migrants would have to become part of Australian society but that they could also keep much of their heritage and identity.

As Prime Minister, Menzies reflected this sentiment, pointing out how he was proud to keep up his Scottish traditions and migrants were welcome to do likewise. In 1961 he told a rally that quote 'We have believed, and believe, that the flow of good people, with a variety of cultures and experiences, and backgrounds into this country is giving to us a strength, a vigour, a variety of minds which we would never otherwise have acquired'.

Matching this shift in emphasis were gradual relaxations in the White Australia Policy which came throughout the 1950s. Once Calwell was no longer minister, the vast majority of the remaining non-Europeans who had entered Australia during the war were allowed to stay. In 1952 it was decided that the foreign-born wives of Australian servicemen would be allowed to relocate to Australia. In 1955 an updated Nationality and Citizenship Act made the process of naturalisation far less onerous, leading the number of new citizens to skyrocket from 5000 a year in 1954 to 49000 in 1959. From 1957 non-Europeans could also become citizens without securing a special exemption, although they had to have lived in Australia for 15 years to do so.

Then in 1958 a landmark step was taken with the abolition of the infamous Dictation Test, which the Minister for Immigration Alec Downer condemned as archaic, heavy handed and doing serious damage to Australia's international reputation. It was replaced with a system of entry permits under which racial discrimination was largely confined to those seeking permanent residency. Other reforms featured in the 1958 Nationality and Citizenship Act included creating an Independent Commissioner to check the Minister's discretionary power to deport people, ensuring that potential deportees were explicitly notified of what law they had broken, and prohibiting the deportation of those who had already been naturalised.

But perhaps the most crucial way in which the White Australia Policy was eroded during the Menzies era was via the Colombo Plan. This was an international agreement made in 1950 to help the countries of Asia in their economic development, with the underlying rationale being that the best way to prevent the spread of communism throughout the region was to ensure that Australia's Asian neighbours were prosperous. The Colombo Plan thus reflected a government prioritising external strategic imperatives, and particularly how Australia was viewed in the eyes of the world, over any potential domestic backlash.

The Colombo Plan involved a record level of foreign aid investment, but its more visible manifestation was the number of Asian students who were sponsored to come to Australia to study. The aim was to train them in fields like engineering, so that they could then use the expertise they gained for nation building at home. Between 1951 and 1965 some 5,908 Colombo Plan students studied in Australia. They came from 15 different nations, although the largest cohorts were from Malaya and Indonesia. As the Plan proved its worth they would be more matched by large numbers of private students who were likewise allowed to bypass White Australia to study. For example in 1961 there were a little over 500 Colombo Plan students studying in Australia, but there were 3250 private overseas students.

These large numbers of students were on campus interacting in person with a whole generation of Australia's future leaders, and in doing so they helped to ensure that they did not develop the same ignorant prejudices about non-whites that their parents often held. Ironically, part of the intent behind the scheme was to prove to Asian nations that despite the existence of the White Australia policy, Australia was not a racist or hostile nation, with the hope being that students would take a favourable impression home with them and spread the word. As External Affairs Minister Richard Casey put it, the aim was to quote 'break down prejudices and misunderstandings on both sides'.

The impact of the Colombo students in changing Australians views was not limited to campus either. Like the 'Beautiful Balts' before them, the Colombo Plan students were the subject of a significant propaganda campaign that spread a message of competence and cooperation to older and more ordinary Australians. There were schemes in which Colombo plan students spent time living with Australian families, and during holiday breaks there was often an effort made to take them out of the cities and show them 'real' Australia. Many historians now credit the Colombo Plan as being one of the main factors in eroding White Australia, achieving internally what external international pressure alone could not.

For all of this tremendous progress, it must be noted that the White Australia policy had not been formally abolished by the time Menzies retired in January 1966. As a man born in 1894, Menzies reflected some of Australia's older values and was conscious of their hold on the electorate. Though for what it is worth he did insist that his acceptance of a liberalised White Australia policy was not based on any sense of racial superiority, but instead a desire to avoid the divisive ethnic tensions that he had seen in many other countries during his long career as an international statesman. With the socially conservative Arthur Calwell being Leader of the Opposition from 1960 until 1967, not only did the policy continue to have bipartisan support, but until the ALP finally dropped White Australia from its platform in August 1965 there loomed some possibility that Calwell might have led a populist campaign against its final eclipse.

Nevertheless, the significant changes which this presentation has outlined meant that by 1966 the policy had become hollow and was under significant attack. The Australian public had been carried over on a long and successful journey to the point at which they might finally contemplate and ultimately accept the policy's ending.

In essence, it came almost immediately, with the incoming Holt Government's review into immigration recommending a focus on an applicant's suitability to settle, their ability to integrate and their professional qualifications, regardless of their race or nationality. Further, non-Europeans who had been required to reside in Australia for 15 years before they were permitted to apply for citizenship were finally able to become citizens after five years, in line with the requirements that applied to European applicants.

Holt's changes were widely accepted, thanks in part to rise of Gough Whitlam, who replaced Calwell as Opposition Leader and who would win office himself in 1972. During his Prime Ministership there would be a winding up of the last remnants of White Australia, and the embrace of an official policy of multiculturalism which abandoned any notion that cultural unifiers were a prerequisite for national harmony.

But while this might be a neat place to wrap up the story, it is important to note that the competing imperatives to discriminate or to populate never fully disappeared. Indeed, even the Whitlam Government made a strategic decision to eschew the opportunity to accept large numbers of refugees from South Vietnam in the wake of the Vietnam War. This decision was driven by domestic political concerns and was overturned by Whitlam's successor Malcolm Fraser. And there is actually a big mural of Fraser in Footscray, an area which to this day is home to a large Vietnamese community.

In modern debates over immigration, issues relating to employment and wages are still frequently discussed. These days they are often complemented and even overshadowed by the contemporary focus on the housing crisis. The Australian public and governments are still continually weighing up to what extent they should protect or hoard those fruits which we enjoy as Australians, or open our doors in the hope of fuelling the growth of the national economy. Indeed, it is no surprise that debates on immigration have become more toxic as we endure a cost-of-living crisis, much as they did during the 1890s or 1930s. So in conclusion I hope this has helped you to wrap your head around the broad story of Australian immigration and the decline of the White Australia Policy, by understanding the underlying continuities in the debates which have driven change. Thank you.