

The Road to Equality: The Legacy and Termination of the White Australia Policy

The 'Immigration Restriction Act 1901', colloquially acknowledged as the 'White Australia Policy', was an act that aimed to prevent non-British migration to Australia. Its existence reflects the historic racial discrimination and prejudice in our immigration and policy-making systems. Analysing the act, we can deduce what values, standards, and discriminatory behaviours are reminiscent and the pivotal mark its repeal made on the Road to Equality.

In the modern day, Australia's treatment of migrants, asylum seekers, and ethnic minorities in general can only be described as subpar. Since Federation, our nation has been infiltrated by outdated values, prejudiced beliefs, and discriminatory policies plaguing all aspects of Australian society. Despite ground-breaking attempts to 'make amends' for our dreadful history with migration and improve Australia's global image, the remnants of ancient policies that are only advantageous to 'White Australia' still affect our 'political ecosphere'. Perhaps the most infamous of these policies is the 'Immigration Restriction Act 1901', commonly known as 'The White Australia Policy'.

'The White Australia Policy' was a piece of federal legislation that aimed to limit non-British migration to Australia, founded on racist superstitions and viewpoints, and caused indeterminate damage to Asian-Australian international relations. Former Attorney-General Alfred Deakin even described the act as "the prohibition of all alien-coloured immigration, and more, it means at the earliest time, by reasonable and just means, the deportation or reduction of the number of aliens now in our midst." (Parliament of Australia, 1901). The colonial viewpoints of racial purity and dominance still held a firm grasp over Australian democracy, as exemplified by the quote from Alfred Deakin, even describing non-white Australians as aliens. This criticism was founded on beliefs that non-white Australians were intellectually or morally flawed. Australia had attracted mass 'non-white' migration during historical periods like the Gold Rush, where these migrants eventually moved into cities and took jobs for cheap labour and selling products for cheaper prices. 'White Australia' feared this was detracting from their businesses, and thus, mass fearmongering and 'scare' campaigns led tensions to rise between non-white and white Australians. The divide between non-white and white Australia was particularly noticeable in the presence of Pacific Islander ('Kanaka') labour in the north of Australia, with tensions rising and many opposing the use of 'Kanaka' labour as it was considered a 'cheap alternative' to pay fair wages to 'White Australians'. The belief that migrants were 'stealing jobs' and detracting from Australian society became mainstream. Each colony established its own policy restricting non-white migration, particularly in New South Wales, where in 1881 and 1887, acts were passed to prevent 'the influx of Chinese immigration' from other colonies. A united immigration policy was one of the main objectives of Federation, and thus, the 'White Australia Policy' was vastly supported by the Australian public.

The act came into effect on December 23rd, 1901, implementing a two-fold approach to restrict the population growth of migrants. Specifically, the act enabled immigration officers

to make any non-European migrant sit a 50-word dictation test. Initially, this test was conducted in any European language; however, by 1905, it was amended to any prescribed language. Intentionally, the dictation test theoretically could have been given in an irrelevant language to the migrant or migration processes, that a migrant would be unlikely to speak, thus majorly reducing the likelihood of someone successfully emigrating if they were seen as 'undesirable to Australian society'. Before 1909, the test was administered 1359 times with only 52 successful participants, and after 1909, not a single participant was successful. Furthermore, the act prohibited anyone who was regarded as an 'idiot' from emigrating to Australia, even threatening penalties to an officer who may assist in the immigration of an 'idiot', and its loose definition provided a simple excuse for immigration officers to deny admittance to Australia. 'The White Australia Policy' had a megalithic impact on Australia's demographics, and by 1947, only 2.7% of the Australian population were born outside of the UK, Ireland and Australia itself. It mainly affected Australia's Asian population, which reduced from 1.25% in 1901 to a meagre 0.21% in the late 1940s (National Museum Australia, 2023). Later policies such as the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 and the Post and Telegraph Act 1901 expanded on the principles of the White Australia policy, preventing loopholes for potential migrants such as labourers. In conjunction with this, Australian politicians implemented several programs to incentivise British migration to Australia, and the government adopted a 'populate or perish' mindset while maintaining its 'anti-non-white migration' values. These programs included the 'Ten Pound Poms' program, which famously enabled 10-pound migration fees for British citizens to migrate to Australia after the Second World War. It soon became obvious that the 'White Australia Policy' and the 'populate or perish' ideals were incompatible and were an impediment to population growth.

British government measures discouraged British migration to Australia after the Second World War, so Australia began to source migrants from other European nations, which resembled the first loosening of the 'White Australia Policy' and decreased public support of racial purity. Arthur Calwell, the immigration minister of the Chifley government, made the controversial decision to enable the migration of displaced persons from Europe, which particularly led to the migration of the 'beautiful Balts'. The 'beautiful Balts' were fair-skinned, ethnically Baltic peoples and arrived in 1947. This started the gradual welcoming of non-British migrants to Australia. Policies slowly enabled the migration of select migrant groups, such as further European settlers, and from the late 1940s to early 1950s, carefully selected temporary Middle Eastern and Asian migrants. Under the Menzies government in 1957, temporary visa restrictions were reduced, and non-European migrants were eligible for citizenship after 15 years (whilst European settlers were eligible after only 5) of permanent residency. The 'Immigration Restriction Act 1901' was then repealed in 1958 by the 'Migration Act 1958', which notably abolished the 'dictation test' element of Australian migration and covered restrictions regarding the deportation of permanent residents. However, the act still contained several remnants of the 1901 act, removing many of the discriminatory elements. Possibly the most significant step to the cessation of the White Australia policy occurred in 1966, under new regulations met with bipartisan support introduced by the Holt government. Specifically, all migrants under new legislation were subject to the same rules and regulations regarding acquiring visas, and the aforementioned '15-year eligibility buffer' to citizenship was reduced to 5 years for all permanent residents. Finally, Australia had taken steps to ensure equality and reduce discrimination in its migration system. The roots of multiculturalism began to spread in Australia, forming a prosperous society. The new migration laws boosted

Asia-Australian relations and created trade and tourism prospects. Australia particularly became involved with migration and acceptance of refugees during treacherous periods of Asian conflict, such as the acceptance of many Vietnamese refugees. Despite the new proposals, the Holt government did not establish migration offices in Asian nations nor assist Asian asylum seekers and migrants in the migration process. In 1973, the Whitlam government officially denounced the 'White Australia Policy', thus strengthening Australia's multicultural society, recognising the injustice of Australia's deterrence to migration and recognising that the historical policies were outright racist and discriminatory, a black mark on Australia's history.

Despite Australia's high levels of multiculturalism, the impacts of the White Australia policy are still felt today. In the era of Trumpian politics and extremist beliefs plaguing mainstream media, many principles of the White Australia Policy are present in Australian politics today. A contemporary example of this includes the controversial amendment to the 1958 Migration Act by the Howard government in 2001, which allowed offshore entry persons to be taken to 'declared countries.' The amendment disproportionately affects Asian migrants and thus has been lambasted for including an element of racial criteria in migration. Whilst the direct implementation of racial criteria or discriminatory views in the migration system seems inconceivable, it is essential to analyse government decisions concerning immigration to ensure biases or indirect racial implications do not plague the system. The legacy of the White Australia Policy has established cause for concern regarding immigration policies, and its continual handhold on Australian politics severely impacts the potential of change and the road to equality and embracing the multiculturalism of Australia.

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National Museum Australia. (2022, September 20). End of the White Australia Policy. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/end-of-white-australia-policy>

This source was incredibly useful to my understanding of the legacy, and gradual cessation of the White Australia policy. It outlined clear government initiatives and changes, assigning what actions and responsibilities were taken by each government.

National Museum Australia. (2023, May 16). White Australia Policy. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/end-of-white-australia-policy>

This source enabled me to clearly understand the creation of the White Australia policy, including the colonial aspect of the policy and the implications of the Gold Rush and how that shaped the policy.

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