

# Australia's Immigration Policy Following the Second World War

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### **What Were the Main Political and Economic Reasons Behind the Australian Governments' Pursuit of Policies of Mass Immigration from the Late 1940s to the Late 1960s? In What Ways Have Government and Community Attitudes to Large-Scale Immigration Changed Since Then?**

#### **Introduction**

Immigration is the process whereby one person (or more) leaves one country (presumably, but not always, their place of birth) to reside permanently in another country. Australia's history of immigration is one based on both political and economic objectives. Such objectives were premised during the 1940s onwards on the industrialisation needed to build both Australia's economy and its status as a nation in the modern world. Furthermore, Australia's population stood at only around 8 million at the conclusion of World War II, and thus governments used various immigration policies to build the population. However, government initiatives were aimed at using immigration as a means of not only building the population, but also improving the economic state of the nation simultaneously. From the late 1960s, however, immigration policies became more restrictive, and hence immigration numbers began to fall compared to those of the previous 3 decades. The reasons behind this can be explained by reference to the governments in place, specifically the Whitlam Government (1972-1975) and the Fraser Government (1975-1983). To explain the political and economic reasons behind the immigration boom we saw from the 1940s to the late 1960s, we must first look to the history behind Australia's immigration and policies and why this "boom" was required.

#### **History of Immigration in Australia (1788 – 1940)**

Australia's stance in the modern world can largely be premised on the influences and effect of immigration. Britain first colonised Australia in 1788 and the original "intention" of this was to send British convicts to settle.[1] However, various other commercial, strategic, and naval reasons have since been put forward by historians.[2]

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Australia saw a great deal of immigration since the country was relatively newly founded. Britain soon discovered Australia's resourceful land and began to send over workers to harvest materials such as wool, gold and wheat.[3] A lot of these immigrants were British convicts; not only did this separate them from the regular British society, but it was free labour. Because a lot of these convicts were males, Britain then sent an influx of females (convicts and single women) to create a gender balance. Once numbers to send from Britain got low, the Empire then began moving other residents of other Dominions, such as China and India, to assist with the labour required.[4]

This soon slowed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century following Australia's federation. One of the first Acts put in place by Parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act,[5] which enabled the "White Australia" policy to come to fruition, the implications of which will be discussed later. In the early years of this century, immigration progressed relatively slowly. When the First World War broke out, Australia saw a high rate of emigration from the country because people would often leave to fight for Britain.[6] Consequently, even following the war, immigration dramatically decreased

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due to the Great Depression, and the fact that non-whites were treated with even more suspicion following the war effort – in particular Southern Europeans.[7]

Due to these reasons, immigration into Australia during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century remained slow – a growth of only 4 million people between 1905 and 1949 – and it wasn't until the conclusion of the Second World War that numbers began to increase.

## “White Australia”

Before we examine the immigration “boom” apparent following WWII, we must first look to the racist policy set in 1901 that restricted immigration to Australia, and how this affected immigration both before and after WWII.

This policy commenced in 1901 with the introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act* and continued until 1973, when it was abolished by the Whitlam Government. Essentially, this policy was designed to create “an ethnically homogenous society”[8] through refusing entry to most non-white peoples. This was first advocated by Alfred Deakin in his 1901 election campaign, and since carried on for 72 years.[9]

James Jupp noted that one of the pillars upon which Australia's immigration policy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has rested was “the maintenance of British hegemony and ‘white’ domination”, [10] which can be seen to be firmly implemented in this policy.

The Australian immigration authorities used several methods to deny entry to the “undesirable” immigrants. The ‘dictation test’ was a test for all people seeking migration to Australia to read 500 words of a script as a ‘test’ for literacy. However, this test was often written in a language not spoken by the person taking the test.[11] This gave the authorities discretion to refuse entry to people based on their racial origin. Between the implementation of this policy and the passing of the Migration Act in 1958, 1,932 people were denied entry because of this test.[12]

Any shipping companies who brought with them non-Europeans seeking residency in Australia would be fined, and so eventually companies became learned enough not to bring such people with them.[13] This was another method used by Australian immigration authorities to keep Australia ‘white’.

Australia justified these policies by claiming that the introduction of non-European immigrants would “provoke social unrest”. [14] These immigrants were also feared because they would compete “for employment and business opportunities” with existing ‘white’ Australians.[15] This was an assimilationist policy which slowed immigration in Australia severely compared to the two decades following the end of World War II.

## Post-World War II Immigration ‘Boom’

Following the conclusion of World War II, Australia saw an influx of immigrants for several political and economic reasons; such as the needs for a larger labour force and the defense against the perceived threat of communism. Throughout the late 1940s into the early 1970s, while the ‘White Australia’ policy was still in place, its administration became somewhat relaxed, thus allowing a higher intake of immigrants from more places.

It became apparent to Australia at the climax of World War II that the nation needed more people to both build the population and economy but also for the defense of the nation. The term “Populate or Perish” – first coined by Bill Hughes in 1937 – was the idea that Australia “must not only be defended but also have enough human resources to defend itself”. [16] As such, Australia had to increase its population to fulfil this necessity in an economically viable way. Several strategies were employed by the Australian government to solve this problem: relaxation on the “White Australia” policy; “Assisted Passage Schemes”; and the use of Displaced Person.

### *Administration of “White Australia” Policy*

Following the war, the nation's recognition that a larger population was required led to decreased restrictions on the

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'White Australia' policy. Soon after the climax of the war, Australia began to allow people of mixed races into the country. Furthermore, in 1958, when the *Migration Act* commenced, the dictation test was , which allowed for an increased intake of mixed race immigrants. However, the acceptance of mixed race immigrants did not become apparent and effective until 1964 when the Department of Immigration gave the Minister for Immigration (Hubert Opperman) discretion to allow individuals into the country based on 3 general 'eligibility criteria'. The first of these was that if a person of mixed race should be allowed in to the country based on humanitarian reasons, e.g. refugee status or displaced, then the Minister has at his discretion the choice to allow them in. Secondly, if such a person carried with them certain expertise, knowledge or qualifications, then they could be eligible for the Minister to administer into the country. Finally, providing they appeared to have somewhat of a 'white' background, and the Minister believed they could otherwise contribute to the nation's economic, social or cultural advancement, they could be eligible for admittance.[17]

The first of these qualifications saw a large number of refugees being taken in by Australia; in fact, Australia's largest intake of refugees occurred between 1947 and 1952.[18] This 'humanitarian' aid eventually placed Australia as a "place to go" for Displaced Persons since the United States barred the intake of such people until 1965. Moreover, Australia was allowing them to immigrate as a means of employing them in the labour market to help build the nation's economy, and so many Displaced Persons saw this is an opportunity for both a home and some form of employment, albeit paid minimally.

Australia's need for skilled workers was seriously reflected in the post-war period as opposed to before the War. The immigration programme set out by government showed that the country no longer needed just any labourers to help build the economy, but, in fact, manufacturing had become the largest industry over agriculture, and so skilled workers and people carrying expertise were much greater demanded than labourers. As such, this directed a large number of mixed race persons who bore certain skills into Australia. (The economic reasons behind this will be discussed later.)

Whether a person could be deemed to be able to contribute to the nation's economic, social or cultural progress was an ambiguous area, and so immigration numbers based on this factor were few and far between.[19] The main area upon which Australia implemented the 1964 reforms was where there was "evidence of close family ties in Australia".[20] This determinant proved critical for many mixed race persons who otherwise would have been rejected entrance into Australia. Where an applicant had close family ties to somebody currently permanently residing in Australia, the Minister for Immigration had at his discretion an option to allow them into the country or not, with the majority of cases being accepted.

In 1967, Billy Snedden – the new Minister for Immigration – decided that it would be more beneficial to the nation to begin allowing more people into the country based on expertise rather than compassionate grounds, as this would help the national economy build.[21] As such, further relaxation on the "White Australia" policy meant that the policy was nearly obsolete. By 1971 there were higher percentages of Southern Europeans, Asians and Americans being brought into the country as opposed to earlier years.[22] For example, the percentage of Asians that represented the total number of migrants in 1947-51 was only 1.6 percent, whereas between 1966 and 1971, this figure rose to 11.2 percent![23] Moreover, while the number of British immigrating continued to represent the largest proportion of nationalities, the 'white' Eastern European and Scandinavian nations such as Norway and Denmark began to decline in terms of percentage of immigrants per year.[24] This further represents the gradual trend away from the "White Australia" policy after WWII until its final abolishment in 1973 by the Whitlam Government.

## *Assisted Passage Schemes*

The "Assisted Package Schemes" (APS) was basically the Australian Government's way of incentivising immigration. This was used mainly before the war and for a short time afterwards to bring in British immigrants that could help with labour to advance the economy. However, following the war effort in the 1940s, the governments expanded the range of applicants who could be eligible for this assistance. As aforementioned, the war brought to the attention of Australian authorities that if war was to break out again, Australia could not rely on Britain and America to defend their coastline again. Consequently, the government planned to increase the defense of the nation through

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building the population and economy simultaneously. To do this, they made use of the relaxed "White Australia" policy and the APS already in place.

The object of the APS, as James Jupp put it, was to build a "healthy, economically viable" country.[25] This was achieved, as we can see today in the modern society. The APS hit its highest point of efficacy in the 1960s. In this period, around 875,000 people were financially assisted, either wholly or partially, by the Australian government for their immigration.[26]

At first, the APS was used to 'lure' in families of people. This would allow the parents to become part of the current workforce, and have the resources for later generations of workforces already in place in the country. However, towards the 1960s, especially following Harold Holt's appointment as Minister for Immigration, more skilled workers were sought to be incentivised by this scheme. Moreover, ethnicity was not such a large an issue now as it was before.[27]

These factors enabled Australia to bring in a multitude of races and people throughout the 1940s and 1960s. After World War II, it became increasingly harder for Australia to attract British immigrants because they would often be housed in hostels, which they did not like, and employment in Britain was at a high and so they did not see the reason in leaving their usual job for another one halfway across the world, where they would probably be paid less. As a result, Australia was in a sense 'forced' to allow other races to immigrate to Australia. For example, the 1960s saw a large number of Turks and Spanish immigrants being brought to the country by this scheme – 80.1 percent of Turks and 70 percent of Spanish were assisted.[28] The Turks were required for their cheap labour and expertise for the car industry, while the Spanish were brought in for help in the sugar industry.

Furthermore, the department of immigration soon found that they could also attract Displaced Persons through this incentive. Displaced Persons are people who have been forced to leave their country of residence for one of several reasons including the likes of war (civil or international) or famine. Australia made use of these people following WWII by using the APS as an incentive for them to immigrate. During Arthur Calwell's time as Minister for Immigration (1945-49), he brought in 170,000 Displaced Persons.[29] The influx of these people meant that Australia could both increase its population and also increase the labour force; Displaced Persons were relatively cheap to house and their wages were low.

The APS proved to be a successful regime implemented by the Australian Government for the whole time of its operation. However, raw numbers of immigrants began to readily increase in the 1940s through to the 1970s; until abolishment in 1982. Throughout this period, the Department of Immigration sought after various nationalities for various reasons (albeit mainly Europeans), and assistance was given to a great deal of these. While providing assistance to so mainly people proved to be costly for Australia, the expertise and labour attained in respect of the industrialisation of the nation and the growth of certain industries saw Australia's economy grow substantially during these periods, which helped for further advancement into the 1970s onwards.

One blank area of these schemes, however, was the little assistance for non-Europeans. The "White Australia" policy, although relaxed, was still in place during this period of time and, as such, the department of immigration was still somewhat restricted as to who they could assist with immigration. This resulted in no assistance to the Chinese or Japanese – the reasons of which were also partly due to the still imminent fear of Communism – and very little assistance to the rest of Asia and the Pacific Islands.[30]

Australia's use of the "Assisted Packages Scheme" proved to satisfy what it aimed to. The scheme was "a form of social engineering designed to keep Australia British, to increase the manual labour force ... and to keep Australia white." [31] As has now been demonstrated, following the Second World War, when manufacturing became the primary industry over agriculture, when more skilled workers were required for labour and when families were sought more than individuals, the APS held to the design envisioned by the Australian Government when put into place in 1901; it kept Australia predominantly white and British, and increased the manual labour force. The effects of this scheme proved to be substantial in improving Australia's economy.

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Thus, the economic and political reasons behind Australia's mass immigration policies following World War II were as follows. Firstly, there was a need to increase the population in case war broke out again and then Australia had the man power necessary to defend their coastline. Secondly, there was a need to advance the nation's economy to a level competitive with the rest of the Western World. Moreover, this requirement meant that Australia's infrastructure and standard of living would improve, and more so if war broke out again there would be more finance available for military resources. It follows from this that the labour force needed to both increase and improve, and hence the changes in the *Migration Act*[32] and the use of the APS. All of these factors were the reasons behind Australia's immigration policies between the 1940s and 1970s, and why immigration 'boomed' and population greatly increased, proving that these policies were effective.

## Policy Changes since 1972

Since 1972, both government and community attitudes towards immigration have changed, and thus the need for so much immigration has become less. Firstly, the Whitlam government in 1973 abolished the "White Australia" policy, which thus led to 'multiculturalism' being the new source of immigration policy. This was enhanced further by the Fraser government also, and entailed a broader approach to immigration, allowing people of all races into the country.

Furthermore, the need for labourers has vastly decreased as Australia has become industrialised and there is a larger shout for skilled workers. Developed industries now call for skilled immigrants rather than plain labourers to satisfy the work required and to have it done professionally.

Finally, there is a lot more 'humanitarian' emphasis on today's immigration policies as we see a fair percent of immigrants being refugees or 'boatpeople'. [33] This is due to the fact that the world's view on humanitarianism has developed substantially over the last 40 years, and as such the policies set forth by governments to cater to their needs of housing have developed also.

## Conclusion

Since World War II, Australia's policies on immigration have developed significantly to cater for various needs. Economically, Australia required skilled workers to fulfil the industrialisation of the nation, and politically, the need for a larger population both in general and for times of war required governments to adopt large-scale immigration policies. Policies like the "White Australia" policy and "Assisted Passage Schemes" set forth by Australian governments saw immigration 'boom' between 1945 and 1972. However since then, changing community and governmental attitudes have seen a more humanitarian and complex approach to immigration to cater for more specific needs, and, as such, immigration rates have dropped somewhat, but still contribute to a great extent to Australia's overall population growth.

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