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Using archival records



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Multiculturalism becoming part of Australia’s identity

**2014 National History Challenge**

**Changing Perspectives: Multiculturalism becoming a part of Australia’s identity**

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*Australia has undergone a significant evolution in regards to multiculturalism. Changing perspectives has profoundly reshaped the long-established ‘White Australia’ tradition and changed the ethnic makeup of the country. Australia’s development into a multicultural country is considered one of its finest achievements and a far departure from Australia’s traditions.*

Australia once saw itself as an Anglo-Saxon preserve and tried to exclude people of colour through restricting immigration to people of British or Western Europe stock. Today, at least a third of Australian citizens now have ancestors other than British or Irish and Australia has absorbed immigrants from over 240 countries and places around the globe. [[1]](#footnote-1) Our multicultural society is a product of the successive waves of mass immigration following the Second World War, which has brought more than 7 million people to settle in Australia[[2]](#footnote-2). Specific discourses of the multicultural policy have been evolving over time, subject to the influence of changing perspectives towards immigration.

During the 1830s, Australia was an unfilled continent which allowed migrants to be quietly absorbed into the vast land. However, the discovery of gold in Australia in 1851 saw Australia’s population double in the decade from 1850 to 1860. [[3]](#footnote-3)People poured in from around the globe, with the majority from China in the hope of discovering gold. The colony of Victoria grew by more than 600 percent in that period. With so many people searching for gold, it was gone in less than a decade. The racial exclusiveness of the Chinese and the fact that they were keen competitors for gold stimulated the alarm felt by white Australians.[[4]](#footnote-4) To men of European descent, the Chinese miners seemed like alien creatures with their conical hats, hair braided in long queues, loose-fitting garments and incomprehensible language. By the 1880s the gold boom had subsided and Australia felt the effects of a worldwide recession. The unemployed looked for someone to blame and fastened the blame on the Chinese. A newspaper article of the 1880s shows the fears that beset the populace: “The Chinese question never fails,” the Melbourne Argus reported. “At every meeting somebody in the hall has a word to say about it and visions of countless millions of the barbarians sweeping upon the colony in a solid body rise on the mental horizons of every man present.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Such fears helped fuel the restrictions on immigration that became known as the “White Australia” policy.

As the debate over immigration policy heated up at the turn of the century, several people from the upper echelons proclaimed their approval of a White Australian policy. Controlling and excluding non-European immigrants was one of Australia’s obsessions well into the twentieth century. British Australian nationhood had been clearly identified with the preservation of the “racial purity” of a White Australia. The development of this ideology was closely linked to the paranoid fear of an Asian invasion of the continent. [[6]](#footnote-6)According to Alfred Deaken, who actively campaigned for a “White Australia” in 1901, “We are guarding the last part of the world where higher races can live and increase freely for the higher civilisation.” Such sentiments were not universal, however. One member of Parliament protested the unfairness of the act to the Chinese: “No race on the face of the earth has been treated in a more shameful manner than have the Chinese,” he said. “They are about the most conservative race in the world and up to late dates they had no desire whatsoever for any intercourse with what they called outer barbarians, but they were forced at that point of a bayonet to admit English and other Europeans into China.” [[7]](#footnote-7)When the Australian colonies became a Federation of states in 1901, one of the new government’s first acts was to pass a law aimed at keeping out people of colour. The exclusionary policy enjoyed widespread support as many Australians feared that an open immigration policy would cause a flood of cheap labour from Asian countries and threaten their jobs.

Australia proved determination to keep its country white; however, there was the need for strong export markets which meant that Australia could not alienate Asian neighbours. *The Immigration Restriction Act 1901* was introduced to place certain restrictions on immigration and to provide the removal of prohibited immigrants from the Commonwealth. [[8]](#footnote-8) Australia would give immigrants a 50 word dictation test in a language they didn’t know and reject them on the grounds of literacy rather than race. The dictation test became the basis of the country’s White Australia policy. The dictation test practically prohibits Chinese immigration, as no one however learned he may be in Chinese or English Literature, would write out a sentence of fifty words in a European language, as for instance, if he wrote and spoke English perfectly the test might be applied in French or German and vice versa.[[9]](#footnote-9) Confidential instructions sent to immigration officials in 1901 by Atlee Hunt, secretary of the Department of External Affairs, stated the law’s intent badly: “It is not desirable that persons should be allowed to pass the test, and before putting it to anyone the officer should be satisfied that he will fail. If he is considered likely to pass the test in English, it should be applied in some other language of which he is ignorant.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The vague wording of the law gave immigration officials the power to reject anyone they didn’t like. It was clear as crystal that the Act was designed with the sinister motive of keeping away Non-Europeans from entering the Commonwealth.[[11]](#footnote-11) The concept of ‘White Australia’ became the single most identifying trait during most of the following century.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The retreat from White Australia began after the Second World War as the Australian government agreed that a high level of continued immigration was essential to the health of the economy. [[13]](#footnote-13)On the other hand, the country’s need was not the only reason for expanding immigration: “Human decency also played some part in making people want to help displaced persons and other victims of the war in Europe,” historian Russel Ward pointed out.[[14]](#footnote-14) When the post immigration program began in 1947, fewer than 10 percent of Australians were born overseas. After the Second World War, Australia gradually opened its doors to people around the world becoming a model for multiculturalism which altered the composition and culture of the Australian population. Nonetheless, Australia remained defiantly white and this commitment continued to define Australia’s identity into the 20th century. In November, 1938, the House of Representatives made the decision to admit to the Commonwealth up to 15,000 refugees over a period of three years to show that Australia has adopted a very sympathetic attitude to refugees from Nazi oppression. [[15]](#footnote-15) Once all those in Displaced Persons camps had been relocated in various countries, Australia continued its large intake of immigrants by signing treaties with a number of European nations.

The 1940s brought about some debate over the White Australian policy. In 1945, The Sydney Morning Herald made an attack on “White Australia” policy. Mr. E. Thornton, national security, openly criticised the “White Australia” policy. “The so-called White Australia policy,” he said “originated in the demand for the exclusion of Chinese, and has been fanned down the years until today (1945) it had become part of our national policy, which none of the major Parliamentary parties has dared to criticise.” Thornton declared “a new approach to the problem of immigration free from prejudice or notions of racial superiority and urged for an immigration quota without discrimination related to colour or race.”[[16]](#footnote-16) A letter to Prime Minister JB ‘Ben’ Chifley in 1948 expressed similar concerns as it requested the modification of the immigration law. The writer Samuel Wong wrote that “it is impossible for Australia to keep this continent pure snow white and that having a few Chinese here would not affect the main White Australian Policy.”[[17]](#footnote-17) There were many conflicting perspectives about immigration during this time period. However, Australians had been warned for almost a century that Asian immigration would mean a loss of jobs and possible takeover of the country. In the newspaper article, *Lets talk with Asians* published in *The Argus* in 1954, J.F.Cairns, a Senior Lecturer in Economic History from the University of Melbourne addresses how “every country has the right to preserve its national and racial characteristics.” Cairns describes “opening the floodgates” to migrants as being highly “irrational” as the large intake of non-European immigrants was testing community tolerance.[[18]](#footnote-18) Dr. Grenfell Price, the Master of St. Mark’s College in the University stated that “The white Australia policy must remain inviolate”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Racial and cultural homogeneity remained a defining principle of nationhood well into the 1960s.

From 1970 onwards, Australia opened its doors to Asians and non-Europeans by absorbing refugees from myriad of countries. From 1973 through 1995, four successive governments encouraged acceptance of Australia’s increasingly mixed population. Many citizens applauded the change but others were dismayed and wanted Australia to go back to the way it used to be. In 1972, the Minister for Immigration, Dr.Forbes made it crystal clear that the Australian government was determined to maintain a predominantly homogenous society. [[20]](#footnote-20) There was widespread debate on Australia’s immigration policies in the government. In 1972, former Opposition Leader, Mr Calwell, attacked the concept of a multi-racial Australia and said that “coloured migrants could make Australia a chocolate coloured nation by the 1980s since coloured migrants lived on the smell of an oily rag and bred like flies.” His view was rejected by many Australians, but there was still widespread tension regarding this throughout the nation as many Australians still had the fear of “the Yellow Peril” and felt overwhelmed by the flood of coloured migrants into Australia.[[21]](#footnote-21) Gough Whitlam, leader of the Opposition Labor Party, campaigned in 1972 on a platform that “renounced discrimination between prospective migrants on any ground of race or colour of skin or nationality.” Gough Whitlam was determined to reverse support for White Australia, reduce British connection and oppose racist ideas and practices,” multicultural specialist James Jupp pointed out. The most important development was the passage of the *Racial Discrimination Act* of 1975. Any “discrimination, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin,” was under the Act outlawed. According to Whitlam in 1975, “The new Act writes it firmly into our laws that Australia is in reality a multicultural nation where… peoples from all parts of the world can find an honoured place.”[[22]](#footnote-22) In abolishing White Australia and finally creating a legal apparatus of anti-discrimination, the Whitlam government laid the foundations of multiculturalism in Australia.

During the 1970s and 1980s changes in the nation’s immigration and settlement policies meant that the country became increasingly diverse, quietly absorbing immigrants from many lands and backgrounds. However due to a recession and rising unemployment rates, those who adamantly opposed these policies would make them into a national issue as they felt that the refugees arriving by boats would steal their jobs and further unemployment in a time of hardship. As civil wars broke out after the Second World War, large numbers of people were forced to flee turmoil or persecution at home and seek asylum as refugees. The majority of refugees who arrived from 1975 through the end of the century came from the same region-the Indochina countries of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Thousands and in times tens of thousands of South Vietnamese fled after the Communist takeover. The Vietnamese refugees faced many handicaps: prior to the war there had been no established Vietnamese presence in Australia so initially they stood out and were viewed as “aliens” by most Australians. The increased presence of the Vietnamese upset many Australians. There was a resurgence of xenophobia and increased hostility against immigration and multiculturalism. The historical fear of being taken over by Asians resurfaced. Historian, Geoffery Blainey, a professor at the University of Melbourne emerged as a spokesperson in the 1980s for the discontent over rising Asian immigration. Blainey published a book *For All Australia*, to criticise the country’s multicultural policy. Blainey declared that “multiculturalism itself is quietly anti-British and the department of immigration and ethnic affairs could well be called the department of immigration and anti-British affairs”. [[23]](#footnote-23)By the end of the twentieth century such views were fading rapidly as the ideas of a monoculture world no longer existed.

Multiculturalism is a vital feature of Australia’s history and identity. Modern Australia is composed of a wide variety of cultural and ethnic groups and is considered one of the most diverse and multicultural nations in the world. Loss of exclusiveness has helped us rejoice in multiplicities long buried beneath the myth of being 98 percent British. [[24]](#footnote-24)Shifting orientations in regards to immigration has allowed Australia to become a cosmopolitan nation over the span of Australia’s short history.

**Word Count: 2500**

**Annotated Bibliography:**

**Primary Sources: Archival Records**

*National Archives of Australia: A183/1, 581/1 part 1, Origins of the White Australia Policy, 1949*

This document mentions the original reasons for the introduction of the White Australia policy. The Chinese goldminers differed greatly from British colonists in language, customs and cultures which strongly influenced the Europeans’ views on other races during the 1840s and 1850s.

*National Archives of Australia: A1559, 1901/17, Immigration Restriction Act 1901, 1901*

Created by the House of Representatives in 1901, this document highlights the motives of the Immigration Restriction Act. This legal act makes it almost impossible for Chinese and all non-European people to settle in Australia. With this act, the concept of White Australia was established as the original purpose of the act was to place restrictions on immigration and remove prohibited immigrants.

*National Archives of Australia: A1, 1903/2900, In reference to certain provisions of the Immigration Restriction Act affecting the Chinese, 8 January 1903*

This letter addressed to Prime Minister Edmund Barton proves that the dictation test limiting non-European immigration was successful and fully met the expectations of it being a method of excluding ‘coloured’ migrants.

*National Archives of Australia: A433, 1950/2/176, White Australia policy-modification urgently required, Newspaper article, 4 June 1948*

*White Australia policy-modification urgently required* highlights how the White Australian policy implies superiority towards other races. The Newspaper article explains how Australia should modify the White Australia policy as Australia requires an increasing migrant population to stimulate economic growth.

*National Archives of Australia: A5954, 2122/2, 20 million needed to hold Australia, Newspaper article, 22 April 1949*

This document emphasises how it is absolutely necessary for Australia to increase its population through immigration. The newspaper article published on 22 April, 1949, after the Second World War, discusses how Australia will be easily threatened by other countries in war unless the population is increased immediately. The author warns Australians about how Australia will have no future unless there is population growth.

*National Archives of Australia: A981, Mig 52 part 3, Acceptance of refugees, Reply to a letter from Robert J Caldwell, 17 October 1941*

The Minister for the Interior in the House of Representatives in November, 1938, has made a decision to admit to the Commonwealth up to 15,000 refugees over a period of three years. The writer, John J Dedman, claims that Australia has adopted a sympathetic attitude towards the suffering of refugees from Nazi oppression in the Second World War.

*National Archives of Australia: A5954, 2122/2, Attack on ‘White Australia’ policy, 6 June 1945*

This newspaper article published in the Sydney Morning Herald on 6 June, 1945 shows the changing perspectives that emerged after the Second World War. The author criticises the White Australia policy as it implies superiority based on colour. The article asks for a new approach to the problem of immigration, free from prejudice or notions of racial superiority. This newspaper article gives evidence to show how an increasing number Australians were dismissing the White Australia policy.

*National Archives of Australia: M1455, 341, Anti-Asiatic policy, Letter to Prime Minister JB ‘Ben’ Chifley, 28 February 1948*

This letter to the Prime Minister protests against the White Australia policy, as the author, Samuel Wong believes there should be modifications regarding Chinese immigration. This source mentions that it is impossible for Australia to keep this continent snow white and thus, a referendum should be taken to allow a few hundred Chinese in Australia.

*National Archives of Australia: A5954, 2122/2, Let’s talk with Asians, Newspaper article, 29 July 1954*

This newspaper article provides an insight as to how the media strongly influenced the ideologies of Australians towards immigration. The newspaper article establishes how Australia’s national and racial characteristics of a White Australia will disappear if Australia continues to receive Asian immigrants and therefore was very useful to the construction and development of ideas of different perspectives towards immigration.

*National Archives of Australia: A5954, 2122/2, Defence of White Australia policy, Newspaper article, 1 February 1954*

This newspaper article shows how many Australians still cherished the idea of a White Australia and did not want non-European immigrants to enter Australia. This source proves that there was still strong support for the White Australia policy in 1954.

*National Archives of Australia: A1838, 1531/1 part 10, Homogeneity in Australia, Press release, 2 May 1972*

The Minister of Immigration, Dr Jim Forbes on May 1972 wished to make it crystal clear that the Australian government was determined to maintain a predominantly homogenous society. Dr Forbes stated that by keeping Australia as a ‘homogenous society’, is in Australia’s best interests as it will allow Australia to be free of avoidable tensions.

*National Archives of Australia: A1828, 1531/1 part 10, Coloured migrants: Parties reject Calwell view, Newspaper article, 3 May 1972*

In 1972, former Opposition Leader, Mr Calwell, attacked the concept of a multi-racial Australia by stating that “coloured migrants could make Australia a chocolate coloured nation by the 1980s since coloured migrants lived on the smell of an oily rag and bred like flies.” His view was rejected by many Australians as during this the 1970s which shows that Australians were becoming more accepting towards the idea of multiculturalism and supported Australia in becoming a diverse, multi-ethnic nation.

*The Australian, White Policy Switch, Newspaper Article, 3 August 1965*

This document contained evidence about how the Australian Labor Party ended the traditional White Australia policy and agreed to allow a restricted number of Asian migrants to enter Australia. This newspaper article highlights how during the 1960s, the Australian Labor Party was willing to open its doors to Asian and non-European immigration.

*The Australian, More Asians will be let in, Newspaper Article, 10 March 1966*

This newspaper article provided further evidence that specially qualified non-Europeans were now allowed to migrate to Australia more easily and able to seek Australian citizenship more quickly.

*The Australian, Whitlam opens door to skilled Asian migrants, 14 March 1974*

This document was useful for information about how in 1974; Prime Minister Whitlam announces Asian applicant’s trade qualifications to be recognised effectively ending the White Australia Policy.

**Secondary Sources: Books**

*Dubourdiu-Kennedy, E. 2006, Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action, Ashgate Publishing Company, Great Britain*

This was an exceptional book that provides a detailed juxtaposition of country case studies which allowed the reader to make comparisons and highlight disparities. It explored the concept of multiculturalism in Australia and examines how Australia was not always open to a multicultural policy. The book provides a wide range of statistics and gives a detailed analysis of the changes that led to multiculturalism in Australia. The book also addresses how societies achieve cohesion when the population is made up of different racial and ethnic groups.

*Soutphommasane, T. 2013, Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From, NewSouth Publishing, University of New South Wales*

This was a very detailed book which provided an insight into the overwhelming success of multiculturalism in Australia. The historical positioning clearly identifies the origins of multiculturalism. It provided a summary of the historical and present multicultural policies in Australia while personifying Australian multiculturalism as a national success story. *Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From* presents strong research by explaining the philosophy of multiculturalism as well as exploring the present day community success while underscoring the massive demographic changes that have overtaken Australia.

*Macleod, L, C. 2006, Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future, McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan*

This book documents the changes in Australia’s immigration policies and explains how Australia has become a nation of people from diverse cultures. The book presents a historical overview of patterns of immigration and examines many aspects to the concept of multiculturalism. It clearly highlights the historical events that allowed Australia to become the multiethnic society it is today.

*Richards, E. 2008, Destination Australia: Migration to Australia since 1901, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney*

This book was very insightful as it provided an extremely detailed account of the impacts of Australia’s immigration experience over the past half century. The book was written by one of Australia’s leading historians of immigration and explores three main themes: the maintenance of British White Australia though to 1947; the Europeanisation of immigration through to the 1970s and the dismantling of White Australia. The book covers historical debates about Australia’s perceptions in relation to immigrations.

*McQueen, H. 1998, Temper Democratic-How exceptional is Australia? Wakefield Press, South Australia*

This book offers a fascinating and detailed account of the historical events that has led to our multicultural present. It also explores what how multiculturalism is a defining characteristic of our nation since multiculturalism in our national identity makes us unique and exceptional.

**Multimedia**

*Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us, SBS Documentary Australia, 2011, Renegade Films*

This documentary emphasises how modern, multicultural Australia was forged against the odds. It uncovers the untold story behind Australia’s multicultural mix. This documentary addresses Australia’s post-Federation migration policy.

*Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta, SBS Documentary Australia, 2012, Hickey, J*

This documentary tells the story of the struggles faced by Vietnamese refugees and highlights the impact of Vietnamese immigration to Australia. *Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta* reflects Australia’s struggles with multiculturalism, the acceptance of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees resulted in conflict and widespread debate throughout Australia. The historical fear of “yellow peril” and “being taken over by Asians” caused many Australians to feel threatened by the increased presence of non-European refugees.

1. Macleod, L, C. 2006, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future,* McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan, pages 5-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Soutphommasane, T. 2013, *Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From*, NewSouth Publishing, University of New South Wales, pages 1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Soutphommasane, T. 2013, *Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From,* NewSouth Publishing, University of New South Wales, pages 4-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Archives of Australia: A183/1, 581/1 part 1, Origins of the White Australia Policy, 1949 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Macleod, L, C. 2006, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future*, McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan, pages 97-112 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dubourdiu-Kennedy, E. 2006, *Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action,* Ashgate Publishing Company, Great Britain, pages 7-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Macleod, L, C. 2006, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future*, McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan, pages 97-112 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. National Archives of Australia: A1559, 1901/17, *Immigration Restriction Act 1901,* 1901 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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14. Macleod, L, C. 2006, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future*, McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan, pages 113-128 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. National Archives of Australia: A981, Mig 52 part 3, *Acceptance of refugees, Reply to a letter from Robert J Caldwell*, 17 October 1941 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. National Archives of Australia: A5954, 2122/2, Attack on ‘White Australia’ policy, 6 June 1945 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. National Archives of Australia: M1455, 341, *Anti-Asiatic policy, Letter to Prime Minister JB ‘Ben’ Chifley*, 28 February 1948 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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23. Macleod, L, C. 2006, *Multiethnic Australia: Its History and Future*, McFarland & Company, the University of Michigan, pages 128-139 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. McQueen, H. 1998, *Temper Democratic-How exceptional is Australia?* Wakefield Press, South Australia, page 205 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)