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Global Migration Stories

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Immigration Nation

The demise of the White Australia Policy (WAP) was brought about by a combination of external and internal push-pull factors. The strongest influence that realized the downfall of the policy was war. The event of war on a global scale began a cascading effect of interwoven causes outside and within Australia which would ensure the eventual destruction of the WAP. In this sense there are four main points that can be focused on when looking at the issue. These are; Australia's transformation during World War II (WWII) to an industrialised economy driven by the war effort; massive numbers of refugees from war torn Europe looking to resettle; a paranoid fear of invasion from the communist threat and the humanitarian crisis at the conclusion of the Vietnam war.

During WWII Australia's economy had undergone a transition to an industrialised economy which required more labour than Australia possessed.¹ Australia's preferred source of immigration, the United Kingdom, having just suffered over four-hundred-thousand casualties during the war was in no position to meet the numbers required either. If Australia was to sustain a continued rate of growth they were going to have to source additional immigrants from places other than the UK. The argument put forward by the head of the newly formed Immigration Department, Arthur Calwell, was to "populate or perish".² Furthermore the opinion at the time was that another war with Japan or another Asian nation such as Communist

¹ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

² *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

China was inevitable. In order to meet this threat Australia would need to increase its population at a faster rate to be able to effectively defend itself. This situation in Australia can be classed as internal or in terms of immigration, a pull factor which was the first step in the ultimate failure of the WAP. These events forced Australia to turn to the non English speaking nations of Europe as a source of immigrants.

At the conclusion of WWII in Europe there was an inconceivable amount of people left homeless and displaced. These people were seeking a country to begin new lives in. The ravages of war had left large swathes of Europe in tatters and many of its populations scattered. Not least of these were the survivors of the holocaust many of whom had lost their entire families. No longer having any familial ties, a large majority of them wished to escape the communities that had so thoroughly persecuted them. In 1945 Arthur Calwell issued a landing permit to two-thousand Jewish refugees.³ Even these migrants were met with criticism by the Australian media and in some cartoons depicted as rats.⁴ For many other displaced people in Europe, returning home was not an option due to the falling of the iron curtain which had divided the continent at the close of WWII. For many of these people, to return home would mean being sent to Siberia by the Soviet Union.

Communism also played another role in the decay of the WAP when fear of the domino effect took hold in Australia.

³ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

⁴ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

With the onset of the Cold War, a perceived threat from the domino effect which would eventually engulf Australia forced the government to “resist communism, not by keeping Asians out, but by letting them in”.⁵ The Colombo plan, which Prime Minister Menzies signed up to in 1950, was an attempt to create a bloc of nations that would resist communism in Asia. One of the most important features of this agreement that would affect the WAP, was the admittance of two-thousand Asian students from various countries throughout the region. One of the secondary motivations for educating these students was that they would inadvertently act as ambassadors and testify to the success of the WAP in creating a prosperous and healthy nation.⁶ However by allowing these students in, quite the opposite happened. Asian students began to influence the thinking of Australian students and making them aware of the injustice of the WAP. In fact, they ended up being ambassadors for the vision of a multicultural Australia in the future. By pulling these students to Australia the government had set in motion a change in attitudes within the country that, by the end of the Vietnam War had matured enough to allow the nation to end the WAP.

At the end of the Vietnam War there was a mass exodus of people from the defeated south being driven out by a fear of punishment from the victorious

⁵ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

⁶ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

communist regime.⁷ Due to Australia's long involvement in the Vietnam War there was an expectation that the country would take its share of refugees. At first Australia's response was fairly weak when they only admit one-thousand Indo-Chinese into the country. However four years later in 1979, the situation was reaching breaking point when there were four-hundred-thousand refugees crowded onto the small island of Guam. Furthermore boats full of refugees were then arriving on Australia's shores. In July, 1979 Malcolm Fraser makes the historic decision to allow fourteen-thousand Indo-Chinese refugees to settle in Australia which truly "marks the end point of the White Australia Policy".⁸

The incremental deterioration of the WAP which culminated in its ultimate demise can be attributed to the push-pull factors that were a result of a fear of conflict and the effect that war has on a global scale.

Bibliography

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⁷ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.

⁸ *Immigration Nation: The Secret History Of Us*, television program, Special Broadcast Service, Australia, 2011.