

## Politics Essay: White Australia Policy

Essay Question: *“It was domestic factors that drove the end of the White Australia Policy.”*

*“We cannot always draw a clear distinction between domestic politics, i.e. politics within the state and international politics, i.e. politics among states. Indeed, the most important issues, whether predominantly domestic or international are not entirely either.”*

- Joseph Frankel, 1969

The White Australia Policy spanned the years from 1901 to 1973, when it was formally abolished by the Whitlam Government. This complex policy shaped Australia throughout the years, diversifying over time to suit ever changing political and domestic landscapes. It was a central controversy that dominated Australian politics for many an era, and in its demise, led to the abandonment of one of the key tenants of federation, and paved the way for multiculturalism. To analyse and dissect this controversy, this essay will begin by defining what it is meant by “White Australia Policy” and then moving on to the domestic factors, the international ones and the shift in social beliefs, values and ideas that lead to the timely demise of the policy. This essay is intended to demonstrate that the end of the policy was created through the shift and destruction of the social narrative that existed in within Australia at that time.

The term “White Australia Policy” is fluid and transitional in the way it can be defined. M. Willard refers to the policy as being “ the defender of a homogenous Australian society, preserving the ideals that created Australia”, whereas S. Brawley refers to it as ‘ a domestic policy that was guided and continued by burgeoning nationalism and the emerging notion of social darwanism’. J. Jupp sees the policy as “ being defined by immigration and its demand and supply”, G. Tawan views the policy as a purely social movement by the Australian people and P. Brain, R. Smith and G. Schuyers view the policy as one driven by cultural demands pertaining to economics and immigration. As this essay is based on the deconstruction and dismantling of social constructs, I will be focusing on the works and opinions of Jupp, Tawan, Brawley, Brain, Smith and Schuyers.

WWII created a culture of fear in Australian society, giving birth to the slogan “Populate or Perish”, as Australian’s saw a need of labor for defence. With the bombing of Darwin, the infiltration of Sydney Harbor, the disillusionment about Britain’s ability to protect Australia and the fact that the “War Cabinet had put in place strategies prioritizing defence for vital industrial areas in time of war (1), as seen by the following quote;

*“It was believed that Australia was too thinly populated and too reliant on primary industry to resist attack or invasion from Asia. It must ‘populate or perish’ ... given greater force by the threat of Japanese invasion.”*

This fear, coupled with the failure of attraction of adequate numbers of British migrants meant that many displaced Eastern Europeans gained entrance to Australia and the parameters of what was considered to be “white” were readjusted. This feeling of fear that rose out of the collective Australian consciousness became an internal factor that allowed the White Australia Policy to be restructured.

Migrants were not received with open arms by the majority of the Anglo-Saxon population, received a harsh time settling in Australia, and created a basis for the grass roots movement for the policy to be changed. Migrants were subjected to forced labor camps for constructions, families torn apart, men to work as laborers, women as domestics, all under pain of deportation. The worst however was that;

*“The greatest resentments were often caused by public attitudes, including the expectations that new arrivals would not speak foreign languages in public and would strive to appear identical to native Australians, which most found difficult.” Jupp*

This dissatisfaction led to many emigrating back home, and thus the fear mentioned in the previous paragraph was not allayed, as the migration plan was failing due to the xenophobic sentiment, unyielding attitudes and social constructs at that time. Thus an external body, the migrants themselves became a part of Australia, adding to the social narrative, however in the swing of constructivism, also tearing it down, seeing the flaws in this self-regulating society. Therefore an external source became domesticized, and in turn became a powerful domestic factor in changing the rigidity of the White Australia Policy, and the social constructs that shaped it.

Fear was not the only factor that was a motivation for increased migration; economics was also a driving factor as no country can operate effectively without one. During WWII, a wartime industry had been created, and while the war was over, there seemed no chance of it stopping. Increased labor was needed to support this industry and its growth, and while there were many returning soldiers, sailors and airmen, there were never enough to meet the demands of the industry. This was summed up no better than when Caldwell, Immigration Minister at this time announced;

*“...all shades of thought agree that Australia’s security, economic stability and destiny as a Pacific power depend in large measure upon the success of the Commonwealth’s immigration programme” (lotsa authors)*

This domestic factor that concerned big industry at the time, became a mover and shaker when it came to the relaxation of the policy to accommodate the needs of capitalist markets.

Egalitarianism, a boasted quality in Australia in the times of Federation, yet with conditions and springs did arise, when being tested with a new racially designated underclass. Australian egalitarianism was not comfortable with the new underclass of people that was based purely on

race, with no regards towards moral fiber, wealth, security and job description, as the warring notions of supremacy and hierarchy of races fought with the principles of equality. This sentiment and battle is summed up in the following sentence;

*“...this implies, if we are not to be hypocrites, that we practise what we preach.”<sup>2</sup>*

Egalitarianism was seen throughout federation, in the “living wage”, equality of women in having the franchise, the “secret” or “Australian” ballot and the creation of unions to name a few. Then in juxtaposition to this was conservative ideals, the hierarchy of races, that first came the English, and from there came other races with Africans and Asians at the bottom. The aforementioned clash between these two deeply ingrained ideals created both tensions and uncertainty within the social consciousness of Australia, and no class was left untouched. This unsettlement gave birth to social movements such as Melbourne University’s Immigration Reform Group (IRG), who campaigned for leniency and acceptance of the Easter Bloc migrants. Cannot use this, its campaigning for uses of quotas.

WWII marked a change in world politics, America had come out of isolationism and a social consciousness was growing, an international one. The atrocities in WWII and the ideological reasons behind them, as seen per Hitler are *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi Party’s actions. This became an intolerable part of Western society, as was seen in the creation of the United Nations, and its resolutions passed that included things such as.... Racism was an ugly word, and as such the international pressure on Australia as a country, seeing South Africa’s demise (check dates), meant many did not want to go down this road. This manifested in Australians societies social constructs, with a movement away from assimilation and into multiculturalism, and the social stigma that was now being attached to those who were racist as seen in the following statement;

*“The White Australia Policy is attacked...The first is a moral one, that it is felt to be abhorrent since it involves racial discrimination.... Being recognized...as being a racist policy, it harms Australia’s international reputation.”* (reference: the white peril)

These ideas and notions, while international in origins in some part, were distilled and transmuted into domestic feelings and interwoven into the rapidly changing social narrative of the time.

It had been proven in WWII that Britain no longer has the ability or even the inclination to protect Australia, and while the Americans had come to our aid, by the late 60’s they were starting to draw away with regards to the anti-war sentiment at home, solidified by the policy of ‘vietnamisation’ (footnote). Australia had adopted at this time a policy of forward defence, to stop the threat of invasion before it reached the Australian homeland itself. This policy had already seen many thousands of servicemen being committed to the defence of various “pro-west” governments, as a means of either protecting Australia from those who would oppose the policy or towards the aim of interacting Australia with those governments that assisted. (ref)

*“...plainly and publically abandon the White Australia policy would gain for the country a good deal of Asian goodwill or at least avoid a great deal of ill-will...” (ref)*

This sentiment from Asian nations would help Australia in creating a buffer for military protection, and at this point in the social consciousness protection outweighed by far the need to maintain xenophobic tendencies. This marked a structural change in the social narrative, a choice between two evils, as was it seen at that time.

The Cold War raged on the international stage and Asia was set to be consumed by communism, racism was no longer a choice in the current ideological environment. The two superpowers of the modern world at that time, the United State of America (USA) and the United Soviet’s Socialist’s Republic (USSR) had taken sides on the ideologies, capitalism and communism respectively, and the world was polarized into west versus east. In the years previously The People’s Republic of China had turned communist, Korea had been torn in two on the 59<sup>th</sup> Parallel, Vietnam was being torn asunder with no peace in sight, and Asia was terrifying place to be, with ‘reds under the beds’ and the red tide advancing (ref). Australian feared the threat communism presented, and this lead to the changing of the policy with migrants from Asia had to only wait five years for application of citizenship, now the same as other “white” migrants, ability to remain in Australia, or the ability to visit family and wider discretionary powers for the Minister (of Immigration) to admit suitably qualified non-Europeans (ref white peril). This change in attitudes was seen through Prime Minister (PM) Holt’s explanation of the change being fundamentally liked to Asia;

*“Australia’s increasing involvements in Asian developments, the rapid growth of our trade with Asian countries... the expansion of our military effort and the scale of diplomatic contact... combine to make such a review desirable in our eyes.” (ref, the white peril)*

In an ever changing world, Australia had to change it fundamental philosophy to protect and safeguard both the people of Australia but the country, its ideologies and national identity. To be put simply, ‘progress for progress’ sake’ (do I have to ref this, its from a fictional novel yet I felt it summed up the sentiment behind the paragraph).

The White Australia Policy’s eventual demise was driven by many factors, until it was literally a death from a thousand cuts. Some of these ‘cuts’ or ‘factors’ you will, came from the domestics that shaped Australia at this time, being the culture of fear that was created after World War Two that allowed the influx of non-‘white’ immigrants, the treatment and integration, or lack of, of the migrants that created a crisis within the plan, allowing to a change in social attitudes towards non ‘whites’ and the restructuring of the term ‘white’. The unsettling of the idea of egalitarianism, and its key root among Australia’s federation tenants and the drive of big business and expansion of the economy that could not be supported by Australian workers alone. International ideas became a factor, in the development of a social consciousness and the events of World War Two in stigmatizing racism and xenophobia, the by-play of the Cold War and its

fight for the ideologies of the world, additionally the need for support from Asia for Australia to survive. Overall all of these factors had a part to play in the erosion of the policy, yet the finality of this erosion was brought about by the dismantling of the social narrative of the time and the destruction of a self-regulation society through social norms. Thus one domestic factor, the dismantling of the social narrative, was the reason behind the fall of the White Australia Policy.