

# AUSTRALIAN RACE RELATIONS 1788–1993

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the potential for assimilation. Little practical change took place after 1937, and the Second World War halted it altogether, but the conference had marked a starting point, the beginning of a shift in direction.

The impetus to reformulate policy at the broadest level stemmed from a realisation that the part-Aboriginal population was not declining—a fundamental blow to the rationale of the protectionist policy. It was also a response to increasing criticism both from overseas and within Australia. Government actions were questioned or condemned by the press in the capital cities and by the early 1930s it seemed that public opinion was no longer willing to tolerate open killings by police. Aboriginal activists in the capital cities, such as William Cooper, William Ferguson and John Patten, managed to win a hearing from members of the federal government for the first time in 1935 and three years later met with prime minister Lyons. In the 1930s some federal ministers with responsibility for the Northern Territory, notably J. Perkins and J. McEwen, sought to put relations on a new footing. Also significant was the development of anthropological research in the inter-war period and the emergence of 'expert' critics of government policy within the universities.

There was, however, little impetus behind these forces for change. The critics were motivated mainly by ideas of justness, most politicians by the perceived need to respond to public criticism, and by the realisation that growth in the 'half-caste' population required a recasting of policy. The war years, which changed the northern economy and provided a range of new economic opportunities for Aborigines, gave a fleeting glimpse of what might have been possible under changed economic circumstances, but when the war ended Aboriginal labour was once again taken for granted and vested interests blocked interference with their subject workforce.

## 6 The era of assimilation, 1945–65

Before 1940, racial discrimination was relatively uncontroversial in the western world. From the late 1940s onwards, this gradually changed, until by the mid-1960s, most western nations disavowed all forms of racial discrimination and ideas of racial superiority.

In the years immediately after the war, change was more apparent overseas than in Australia. Japanese victories in the Pacific in 1942 had shaken the European sense of racial superiority, but the war in the east did as much to entrench white racism as it did to undermine it: wartime propaganda was often marked by crude bigotry, and there was widespread revulsion at the fanaticism of the Japanese and their disregard for human life. The revelation of the horrors of Hitler's death camps, however, seems to have dealt a decisive blow to the possibility of maintaining policies openly based on ideas of racial superiority and exclusiveness. Further, as the postwar ideological battle against communism heightened, 'overt and virulent intellectual racism came to be recognized as a dangerous liability'.<sup>1</sup> Vann Woodward observes that:

Communist propaganda had long used stories of racial discrimination and injustice to discredit American capitalism and democracy in the eyes of the world. The issue gained tremendously in poignancy when the two powers faced each other in an ideological struggle for world leadership. It came near the focus of antagonism when the center of rivalry between Russia and America shifted to Asia and the two systems began to contend desperately for the friendship of the great colored races of the Orient.<sup>2</sup>

The intellectual basis of racism was undermined, a development



linked to changes in the global balance of power but not entirely dependent upon it. The groundwork for the critique of racism had been laid before the war by scholars such as the American anthropologist Franz Boas. After 1945, social scientists and biologists abandoned notions of racial superiority.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights served to institutionalise the principle of racial equality. Through one of its agencies, UNESCO, the UN embarked on a program of education to counter racism. Between 1949 and 1951 UNESCO sponsored meetings of academic experts aimed at producing an authoritative statement on race. The first meeting, whose findings were published in 1950, concluded that:

According to present knowledge there is no proof that the groups of mankind differ in their innate mental characteristics, whether in respect of intelligence or temperament. The scientific evidence indicates that the range of mental capacities in all ethnic groups is much the same . . . All normal human beings are capable of learning to share a common life, to understand the nature of mutual service and reciprocity, and to respect social obligations and contracts. Such biological differences as exist between members of different ethnic groups have no relevance to problems of social and political organization, moral life and communication between human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Such views provided an intellectual basis for campaigns against racial discrimination, in the 1950s and 1960s. Given the growing illegitimacy of overt racial discrimination, changes in Australia were to be expected; yet Australian governments were remarkably slow to abandon racist practices. In countries such as South Africa and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, which made themselves international pariahs by maintaining overt discrimination, reforms would very likely have ended the political and even the economic power of the white minorities. There was no such danger in Australia, yet few substantial reforms were made in the 1950s, a fact which reflects the hold of racism on Australian society, at least at governmental level.

### *Changes in values*

In the 1950s significant shifts occurred in official attitudes towards some ethnic and racial groups which had been regarded as undesirable before the war: large numbers of non-Anglo-Celtic people (southern and eastern Europeans) were admitted into Australia, assisted passages were provided for the first time to immigrants

from such countries, overt racial discrimination against Aborigines was gradually removed, and new policies were formulated, and existing ones defended, in non-racial terms.

The idea that a much wider group of people could become part of Australian society and share the 'Australian way of life' marked an important historical shift, a break with the ideas of racial determinism and exclusivity. Yet it took two or more decades for the significance of this change to show itself fully. In the short term, the basic elements of the belief system and many discriminatory practices changed little, if at all. The aim was to contain change within existing structures; the notion of Anglo-Australian superiority remained the basis for policy.

The first practical change, to policy regulating immigration from Europe, was essentially a product of pragmatism, driven by the need to provide labour for economic development and to increase the population so the country could defend itself.

The most important shift of principle was acceptance of the idea that Aborigines could be assimilated. Yet in the 1950s the emphasis remained on Aborigines who were partly of European descent and thus had an admixture of the 'blood' of the superior race. Similarly, while Asians were excluded, people of 'mixed' Asian descent had some prospect of admission; such people were acceptable if they could convince officials that racially they were predominantly 'white'. There was great reluctance in the 1950s to accept the idea that a 'pure' non-European should ever be granted permanent residence in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Prejudice against southern European and Jewish immigrants changed little, if at all, in the immediate postwar period. The hierarchy of preferred groups remained the same, but as a matter of expediency, to meet numerical targets, the line differentiating those who could be admitted in large numbers from those whose admission was strictly limited was moved as Table 6.1 shows. The preference for the British remained, and immigrant recruitment in Britain received much higher priority than on the continent, as is demonstrated by such programs as the 1957 'Bring out a Briton' campaign.

Although the range of people who were encouraged or at least seen as acceptable was widened, policymakers resisted the notion that this might lead to a major shift in the dominant value system. Assimilationist ideas were based on the notion that the superior Anglo-Australian institutions and values would remain unchanged; all agreed, according to Holt in 1952, 'that Australia must be kept

Table 6.1 Immigrant group status

<i>Hierarchy</i>	<i>Status 1919-39</i>	<i>Status 1947-65</i>
British and Irish	Encouraged	Encouraged
North European	Acceptable	Encouraged
European Jews	Limited	1945-50 limited, then subsumed into 'Other European'
Other European	Limited	Limited/acceptable/encouraged—category determined by numbers required to meet the shortfall in the immigration intake for the year
Middle Eastern	Limited	Limited (with some exceptions, notably Lebanon and Israel)
Asian and African	Prohibited	Prohibited (with minor exceptions)

Note: 'Encouraged' implies that a person is eligible for an assisted passage; 'acceptable' that the person is welcome to migrate, but without assistance; 'limited' that numerical quotas and other devices are employed to control immigration.

preponderantly British in its institutions and the composition of its people'.<sup>5</sup>

The goal of maintaining what was seen as a monoculture was pursued with even greater vigour than in the past. The assimilation of the more favoured groups could be largely taken for granted; a more conscious effort was needed to ensure the assimilation of newly admitted low-status groups. This presented some dangers:

First, . . . that newcomers might form separate communities within the nation—foreign bodies in the flesh of the nation. Second, by sheer weight of numbers they might change almost completely the Australian national character and outlook in the course of time.<sup>6</sup>

Immigrants were 'offered much'; in return they were asked to 'become Australian'.<sup>7</sup> In 1970 Labor Party leader Gough Whitlam noted critically:

Australians have assumed that the benefit of migration is all on one side. We tend to assume that mere permission to settle among us is a boon of such transcendental quality that simple gratitude and silent compliance are the sole duties of those upon whom this benefit is conferred.<sup>8</sup>

Assimilation was not seen as a two-way process. It would be up to those who were 'deemed worthy to share in our Australian heritage',<sup>9</sup> and given the chance to enjoy the superior culture and

way of life, to make the accommodations necessary to fit in. One commentator on policy towards Aborigines has said, in terms generally applicable to European immigrants:

assimilationist policy assumes that their culture and way of life is without value and that we confer a favour on them by assimilating them into our ways; even to the point of taking their children and removing them from family. Every step of the way is based upon an assumption of superiority and every new step is a further entrenchment of that assumption.<sup>10</sup>

New migrants would be given no special assistance or special privileges, which might impede assimilation; it was up to them to assimilate and if they failed it was their own fault—never that of policy.<sup>11</sup>

A prime requirement was that those given the opportunity to assimilate should abandon their previous culture and learn English. Thus it was decided not to publish material intended for migrant use in European languages. Migrants would have difficulty at first but 'any obstruction to . . . learning the language should be strongly resisted'.<sup>12</sup> Migrants and Aborigines should not live in enclaves or form their own organisations but should merge with the mainstream of Australian life. The tenor of the times is captured in the naivety of a 1948 pamphlet designed to introduce immigrants to their new homeland. It advised:

Australians are keen on fair play . . . You will find Australians are very democratic in the way they mix together. They respect the manual labourer as much as a doctor or a lawyer. They do not think that any honest work is undignified . . . Perhaps the most important thing is to learn to speak the language of the Australians. Australians are not used to hearing foreign languages. They are inclined to stare at persons whose speech is different . . . Do not hesitate to speak English. If you make mistakes or cannot make yourself properly understood, keep trying. Someone will always be willing to help you.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-1950s, it was apparent to some that this policy would have to be modified. In 1955, Harold Holt noted that the desire to emigrate was declining in Europe and that more would have to be done to make Australia an attractive destination.<sup>14</sup> In 1956 a report on the 'Cultural Integration of Immigrants' by the immigration department stated that ethnic clubs and societies need not pose obstacles to the basic aim of government policy, acceptance by immigrants of the Australian legal and political system; there was no need for 'conformity to Australian patterns of life in all, or even



in the majority, of the immigrants' social and cultural activities'.<sup>15</sup> Ways to facilitate recognition of overseas qualifications were canvassed, naturalisation was made easier, and the requirement that foreign-language newspapers print a portion of their material in English was dropped.<sup>16</sup> By 1959 the minister for immigration was talking of 'integration' rather than 'assimilation' and it was increasingly accepted that immigrants would not only benefit the economy but also enrich cultural life. Prime minister Robert Menzies predicted in 1962 that Australians 'will . . . be a different people—not detached from our old anchors, not detached from our old traditions, but enriched by new ones'.<sup>17</sup> Such ideas, however, had little practical effect until the late 1960s.

### *European immigrants*

The change of policy on immigration from Europe had immediate and far-reaching results. For the first time in the nation's history, large-scale immigration from the continent, outnumbering immigration from Britain, was not only tolerated but encouraged. The new pattern was established immediately immigration resumed after the war.

Between 1947 and 1951, immigrants from the United Kingdom made up less than 40 per cent of the total, and between 1951 and 1961 they comprised just 30 per cent, less than the proportion from southern Europe. Only a few decades earlier, in the 1920s, people had become concerned when the number of southern European immigrants reached 10 per cent of the British total. Between 1947 and 1951, arrivals from Poland averaged 17 200 a year. In the 1950s arrivals from Italy were at a similar level, while in the first half of the 1960s, when the proportion of immigrants from England rose to 50 per cent of the total for the last time, arrivals from Greece averaged 13 200 a year.<sup>18</sup> The population increased from 7.6 million in 1947 to 13.5 million in 1973. Migrants accounted for 41 per cent of this increase, and their Australian-born children for a further 18 per cent.<sup>19</sup> Fifty-nine per cent of the increase in the male workforce and 41 per cent of the increase in the female workforce came from people born overseas.<sup>20</sup>

But despite the admission of large numbers of migrants from low-status parts of Europe, the traditional hierarchy, which privileged supposed 'Aryan' peoples, changed little.

The war exacerbated hostility to the Japanese but not to the 'Aryan' Germans and their European allies. The government joined

the rush to recruit German scientists and by 1950 it was welcoming ethnic Germans, whom the secretary of the immigration department described as 'some of the finest potential migrants to be found anywhere in the world'.<sup>21</sup> Although the Chifley government was less anti-Semitic than its predecessors, in 1946 restrictions, some covert, were imposed on the admission of Jews, primarily to head off media comment on the size of the influx.<sup>22</sup>

At first European immigrants were indirectly subsidised, then made eligible for assisted passages, but unlike the British, many encountered discrimination even in the selection process. Those who were admitted under the displaced persons program had to enter contracts to work where directed for two years, a form of indentured labour which was strictly enforced, and which some described as 'white slavery'. Immigrants were threatened with deportation if they left the jobs to which they were allocated. A few were apparently deported, and their cases were publicised as a warning to others.<sup>23</sup> People were sent to work on railway maintenance in remote areas or tropical cane fields. When their two years were up, immigrants had to apply to be released from their contracts and for a 'Certificate of Authority to Remain in Australia'.<sup>24</sup> The two-year contract was maintained in immigration agreements signed with European governments in the 1950s, although it seems seldom to have been enforced, probably because of the difficulty of finding jobs for and closely supervising for two years people numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and because the labour market was able by itself to control the distribution of labour and maintain the privileged position of the native born.

The government took little, if any, notice of the qualifications of the 'DPs', as the displaced persons came to be known. It was chiefly interested in providing unskilled labour; after serving their two years, people were left to make their own way. As a general rule, the European immigrants were assigned work disdained by Australians. Displaced persons were to be dismissed first when work ran out, a rule which contravened the accepted industrial practice that the last hired was the first retrenched.

European immigrants were often treated insensitively. They were given numbers to facilitate the work of bureaucrats unfamiliar with 'multisyllabic and foreign names'—even though it was recognised that this might upset people traumatised in prisoner-of-war and concentration camps. An immigrant recalls his reaction to being numbered by his employer:



Australians brought us here as cheap meat from Europe. They gave us a number. We still have those numbers. Look at this: my number is 58. They see me as a number. If I die, this means nothing to them. They will replace me with another migrant. The number will remain the same.<sup>25</sup>

Husbands and fathers were separated from their families and job dissatisfaction received scant attention. The first inquiry into the displaced persons program was concerned with refugees as problems—with the incidence of crime amongst them—not with the problems of refugees. The pattern established just after the war was to be maintained until the 1970s.

The continuing hold of prejudice is further illustrated by the government's relations with the Italian government and recruiting practices in that country. Janis Wilton and Richard Bosworth write in *Old Worlds and New Australia* that: 'The ancient fortresses of racist Australia fell one by one, with scarcely a whimper of protest or regret from politicians, bureaucrats or public opinion.'<sup>26</sup> They could hardly be more wrong.

The number of Italians—and other southern Europeans—wanting to migrate to Australia in the 1950s far exceeded the demand, large though it was. In such a context, governments saw little reason to examine critically, not to say abandon, their discriminatory practices. Between 1947 and 1970 only 18 per cent of Italian immigrants received assisted passages, compared with 85 per cent of migrants from Britain and Ireland, 74 per cent of those from northern Europe, 60 per cent of those from Yugoslavia, and 33 per cent of those from Greece. Most Italian immigrants came from southern Italy, but it was practically impossible for southerners to obtain assisted passage. To be admitted into Australia in the 1950s Italians had to be nominated by an Australian resident or be accepted on the basis of their skills, in which case an assisted passage was provided. This may seem reasonable, but the selection teams for skilled workers operated almost exclusively in the north, from bases in Genoa and Trieste.<sup>27</sup> When in 1959 the government first allowed the entry of independent Italian immigrants, people without nominees in Australia who paid their own fares, they were again chosen from the north. The secretary of the immigration department assured his minister in 1959 that there was little risk that the wrong type of immigrant would be admitted:

we could rely on our selection officers in Italy to understand us if we were to say that we were looking for typical Northern Italians rather

than typical Southerners—the more so if at the same time we stipulate that they confine their selection tours . . . to Northern Italy.<sup>28</sup>

The large increase in immigration from Italy was not welcomed, but it was necessary to meet labour requirements. When the economy took a downturn, the government did not reduce numbers evenly for each nationality but targeted low-status groups such as Italians. This led to severely strained relations with the Italian government. In 1952 Australia stopped all immigration from Italy without consultation; the Italians were left with 10 000 partly or fully processed immigrants and contracts with shipping companies which had been signed at the urging of the Australian authorities.<sup>29</sup> The Italian government temporarily suspended the immigration agreement and relations remained uneasy for over a decade. Not surprisingly, Italians resented the paucity of assisted passages and the lack of recognition of their trade qualifications.

The Italian government several times requested Australian authorities to expedite the processing of sponsored immigrants from the south. This had been delayed because the Australians deliberately allocated insufficient staff to the task, and at times specifically instructed them to limit their processing of applications.<sup>30</sup> Australian residents seeking to bring their relatives into the country were so upset in the late 1950s that a Committee Against Racial Discrimination was formed in Melbourne to protest against 'racial discrimination against migrants from Southern Italy'.<sup>31</sup>

The Italian authorities' sole bargaining chip was their ability to impede the work of Australian recruiting teams in the north. This device won some concessions, but the Italians were sufficiently dissatisfied with Australia's attitude to end negotiations over renewal of the bilateral immigration agreement. This effectively lapsed in the early 1960s, and a new agreement was not signed until 1967.

### Aborigines

The stationing of large numbers of troops in northern Australia during the war produced new employment opportunities for Aborigines and for the first time brought them into contact with a sizeable group of Anglo-Australians who did not regard them as racial inferiors.<sup>32</sup> After the war, however, this situation came to an end. The economic development that would see the Australian population double between 1945 and 1981 bypassed the areas where most Aborigines lived and no serious consideration was given to meeting



labour shortages by training Aborigines for work in the areas of highest demand, the manufacturing and construction industries.

As we have seen, by the late 1930s, as it dawned on Australian governments that the chief assumption underlying 'protectionism'—the ultimate extinction of the Aborigines—was not likely to be borne out, they began to rethink their policies.

C.D. Rowley ended *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* in the early 1940s because he believed the process of destruction had by then come to an end and that Aborigines had begun to be given a chance to join the mainstream. Rowley argued that 'questions of economic opportunity and justice were being raised . . . The problem had ceased to be one of survival and had become one of equality'.<sup>33</sup>

The social welfare legislation of the Liberal and Labor governments no longer imposed a total exclusion on the basis of race. Aborigines could qualify for assistance if they met certain lifestyle criteria. Child endowment was to be paid to detribalised Aborigines not living on reserves. Aborigines exempted from the provisions of state protectionist legislation became eligible for old age and invalid pensions. Unemployment and sickness benefits were available to Aborigines who, in the opinion of the director-general of social services, were qualified 'by reason of character and the standard of intelligence and social development'.

The shift of policy towards assimilation—now to include Aborigines of full descent—was restated at meetings of commonwealth and state officials in 1948 and 1951. The 1951 conference stated the expectation that:

all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do . . . Many years of slow, patient endeavour will be needed before the ideal can be realized . . . Large numbers of these people are not, in fact, in a condition to enter into the full advantages of life in an Australian community.<sup>34</sup>

There were two ways for reform to proceed. The first was to exempt individual Aborigines who were deemed capable of making a life for themselves without close government supervision from legislation which denied them basic freedoms. In a sense these people became honorary whites, whose entitlements could be revoked if they failed to behave as required. Exemption tickets, first issued before the war, were scorned by many, who referred to them as 'dog licences' or 'dog tags'. In Western Australia, for example, changes to the definition of 'Aboriginal' in the mid-1930s resulted in the

extension of discriminatory legislation to people of mixed descent, who had to apply for exemption if they wanted to regain their previous freedom; this demand was greeted with protest and refusals to comply.<sup>35</sup> Under 1944 Western Australian legislation exemption required:

1. Dissolving of all tribal and native associations except for lineal descendants or native relations of the first degree.
2. Service in the armed forces or other demonstration that the person was 'fit and proper'.
3. Ability to speak and understand English.
4. Freedom from serious disease.
5. Two references from 'reputable' citizens.<sup>36</sup>

The second route to reform was via the repeal of discriminatory legislation. This was done widely, the extent and pace of change varying from state to state. In 1957 Victoria became the first mainland state to remove all forms of overt discrimination when it repealed sections of the *Licensing Act*, which prohibited supply of alcohol to Aborigines, and of the *Police Offences Act*, under which it was an offence for a white person to 'wander or lodge in company with any of the Aboriginal natives of Victoria'.

In New South Wales and Victoria, attempts were made to assimilate Aborigines by 'pepper-potting', housing them next door to whites in country towns. The results did not always meet expectations.<sup>37</sup> Aborigines in some states were closely watched and their homes inspected to ensure that they maintained the standards of housekeeping set by white bureaucrats.<sup>38</sup> The removal of children from their kin continued, particularly in New South Wales.

But achieving change through government edict is difficult, as the case of the Northern Territory, which was under commonwealth control, demonstrates. After the 1951 election responsibility for the Territory was given to Paul Hasluck, a politician with a longstanding record of concern for Aboriginal welfare. As a journalist in the late 1920s and 1930s he had drawn attention to the problems confronting the Aboriginal communities of Western Australia, and his interest had led him to undertake postgraduate research into the history of nineteenth-century race relations.

Hasluck was a firm assimilationist. He dismissed the notion of racial difference and viewed Aborigines' problems in social terms. The task of government, he believed, was to promote policies that would allow Aborigines to be 'merged into and be received as full members' of the wider community. For Hasluck Australia was an



open, fluid society, without fixed barriers of class; the task was to integrate Aborigines into this system.<sup>39</sup> He envisaged that Aborigines would contribute to the shaping of Australian national characteristics but would disappear as a distinct people, retaining only 'a proud memory of their ancient origin'. Hasluck was hostile to attempts to promote racial consciousness.

The 1953 Welfare Ordinance was 'based on the premise that full Australian citizenship is as much the birthright of Aboriginal as it is of the white Australian'. The policy of exempting individuals from special legislation was to be turned on its head: in future only individuals in need of special protection would have their freedom curtailed.<sup>40</sup> This was an attempt to substitute individual need for racial criteria, but it was thwarted by the Northern Territory administration, which designated all but a few Aborigines of known full descent—a total of more than 15 000 people—as 'wards', a point which Hasluck omitted from his memoirs.<sup>41</sup>

The experience of the reforming minister highlighted the gulf that separated Canberra from the Deep North and policy makers from the realities of life. It would take more than new policies to change the place of Aborigines in Australian society.

### *Non-European immigrants*

Policy towards non-European immigrants also shifted in the postwar period, but the complexities of administrative procedures and the secretiveness of governments make this a difficult subject to unravel.

Even in the 1950s governments were most reluctant to grant any non-European permanent residence in Australia or to reform Australia's racially discriminatory policies. But the policy of exclusion became contentious and a number of minor concessions were made which gradually eroded it. Between 1947 and 1953, members of three distinct groups were granted residence.

During the war some 5500 nationals of Asian countries overrun by the Japanese were admitted on a temporary basis. After 1945, some of these refugees, perhaps a third, sought to stay on. The Labor minister for immigration, Arthur Calwell, insisted that they leave. The outcome was some reluctant departures, forcible deportations, a successful High Court challenge to the legality of his action, and the enactment of new legislation to enable deportations to be resumed. More than 100 immigrants were deported before 1949, when the prime minister halted the process after adverse publicity

both in Australia and overseas. The Liberal–Country Party coalition, which won the 1949 election, allowed the contested arrivals to remain under the status of 'wartime refugees', whereby they could live and work where they chose but would not have the right to sponsor relatives or employees. At least 530, and perhaps as many as 800, remained.<sup>42</sup>

The second group comprised 850 Chinese nationals resident in Australia who were unwilling to return to their homeland after the communist takeover in 1949. After Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore refused to take them they were allowed to remain, under 'liberal attitude status', which was similar to that of wartime refugees.<sup>43</sup>

A third group comprised non-European brides of Australian servicemen, notably more than 400 Japanese women, who were admitted in 1952 and subsequent years. They were exempted from the dictation test for their first five years of residence, a condition under which the government retained the power to deport them.

In the space of a few years at least 1780 non-Europeans had breached the great white walls. They were almost unnoticeable compared with, for example, the 170 000 European displaced persons who entered during the same period, but their admission represented the most significant challenge to the racially exclusive immigration policy since its implementation in 1901.

Arthur Calwell, the first minister for immigration and the last to parade his racism in public forums, staunchly believed in racial exclusivity. His administration of the White Australia Policy was based on the belief that if exceptions were allowed the policy would eventually lose its viability and the floodgates would be opened to Asian immigration.

Although it is said that Calwell harboured no personal sense of racial superiority and maintained good relations with the Melbourne Chinese community, he was fanatical in his administration of policy. This is illustrated by a little-known change to policy on 'mixed-blood' immigrants, many of whom were British citizens and sought entry into Australia as imperial power declined and civil unrest in their homelands increased. At the end of the war it became necessary for a 'mixed-blood' applicant to establish 75 per cent 'white' descent, not 50 per cent, as before. This could be done by producing birth certificates and authenticated genealogies to establish three European grandparents, or two European and two 'half-caste'. In addition, applicants were required to be of European appearance and European in education and upbringing.<sup>44</sup> Despite the stringency of



these conditions, perhaps 10 000 'mixed-blood' people were admitted by 1965, the largest group being the Burghers of Sri Lanka.<sup>45</sup>

Even in Europe, selection officers were required to scrutinise the skin colour of applicants, especially in Mediterranean countries. One person was rejected because the official 'visualised him walking down Martin Place . . . [where] he would have been a "stare object"'. An English family with thirteen children was rejected when it was discovered at the last moment that the youngest child, a baby, was dark skinned, a 'throwback' to the mother's remote Jamaican ancestry. As late as 1964 an English-born resident in Australia was prevented from sponsoring his twin brother when it was found that the latter was 'swarthy and dark'.<sup>46</sup> At the same time applicants in the United States were required to provide evidence of the ancestry of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents to meet immigration requirements.<sup>47</sup>

Under Calwell's administration German scientists were eagerly recruited and little regard was paid to claims that some war criminals were evading security checks and obtaining entry under the displaced persons scheme.<sup>48</sup> Yet Calwell could dismiss out of hand the prospect of the entry of Japanese women, combining denunciation of wartime atrocities with a virulent brand of racism:

While relatives remain of men who suffered at the hands of the Japanese, it would be the grossest act of public indecency to permit a Japanese of either sex to pollute Australian shores. I am sure that in saying this I express the feelings of almost every Australian . . . . While I remain Minister for immigration no Japanese will be permitted to enter this country. They cannot come as the wives of Australian servicemen for permanent or temporary residence, nor as businessmen to buy from or sell to us; they cannot come as pearlers nor as labourers to pearlers. I have no intention of granting interviews to anybody in matters concerning the entry of Japanese into Australia.<sup>49</sup>

His relentless efforts to deport wartime refugees and his crass comments in parliament earned Calwell and his government considerable criticism in the Australian and overseas press. One of his witticisms, a pun on the name of a Liberal parliamentarian, was that 'Two Wongs don't make a White'. On another occasion he said: 'I do not think that an occidental mind can follow the mental processes of an oriental mind.'<sup>50</sup> The Liberal administration which took office in December 1949 was more adept at public relations. Before the election, Menzies had said that: 'decisions that produce obvious injustice or hardship are a danger to the national policy. A foolish or stiff-necked insistence upon a good general rule in all cases and

all circumstances is calculated only to bring the general rule into undeserved discredit and avoidable attack.'<sup>51</sup>

Menzies was no less staunch in his support of racial discrimination, just more diplomatic. The admissions of 1949-50 were reluctantly accepted, not welcomed. Calwell's successor, Harold Holt, informed the external affairs minister in a 'personal and confidential' letter that his period in office had convinced him of the need to uphold strict controls: 'I confess that the more I have to do with the administration of the Immigration Department the stronger becomes my own conviction that we have to hang on to our restriction policy as tenaciously as we can.'<sup>52</sup> Holt envisaged war with an Asian country 'in the years ahead' and was concerned that Asian minorities in Australia would pose a security threat.

Minor administrative changes, however, allowed a trickle of Asians, perhaps an average, in the 1950s, of 250 a year, to gain permanent residence. Precise figures for each 'race', as distinct from place of birth or citizenship, are difficult to obtain and may never have been tabulated, apparently because the government preferred not to know, indeed preferred that no one knew. If figures were kept in an easily accessible form they might one day become public, perhaps be produced in parliament in response to a question on notice. The numbers then revealed might seem too high for sections of Australian opinion and they would certainly be ridiculed by the Asian press.

In 1947 an anomaly was removed whereby immigrants who entered the country illegally and managed to evade capture for fifteen years were accorded the right of permanent residence, yet those in the same situation who had entered legally were not. Thereafter those entering illegally would be deported when found, irrespective of how long they had been in Australia, while those entering legally and remaining for fifteen years under temporary permits—mostly businessmen could apply for indefinite renewal of permits.<sup>53</sup> From 1950 to 1955 Asian spouses of Australian citizens were admitted on a case-by-case basis; thereafter their admission became a right. In the 1950s large numbers of Asian students were admitted temporarily. In 1958 there were almost 5500, by 1964 the number had increased to 12 366, comprising 10 814 private students and 1552 sponsored under the Colombo Plan and other programs. The main source countries were Malaysia, with 5643, and Hong Kong, with 3629.<sup>54</sup> In 1956 'distinguished and highly qualified' Asians became eligible for entry, although only on temporary permits of 'indefinite' duration. These changes were able to be made



without legislative amendments, and hence public debate, because the immigration and naturalisation laws did not specify the targets of discrimination; policy could be overturned by ministerial edict.

These changes, particularly those which were part of a cabinet review of non-European immigration in 1956 and 1957, present a problem of interpretation. Was a gradual liberalisation of policy contemplated? A reading of confidential government records shows that this was not the case. The 1956 reforms were a half-hearted attempt to appeal to Asian elite groups by opening the possibility of their migration to Australia in response to continuing criticism of immigration policy by the department of foreign affairs, which argued that: 'the existing policy could not be logically explained or satisfactorily administered . . . The vital thing from the External Affairs viewpoint is that their posts should be able to say that migration of Asians, however cultured, etc., is not completely out of the question, but depends on individual cases'.<sup>55</sup>

In 1955 Arthur Tange, secretary of the department of foreign affairs, had urged reform of current practice, which gave the impression that 'the most educated and advanced Asian individual is regarded by Australia as being in the same category as unassimilable coolies'.<sup>56</sup> In reality the groups were not in the same category, for 'coolies' had a remote chance of being admitted, an issue that was addressed in 1956.

Modifications to immigration policy made in the first decade of the century provided for the temporary entry of small numbers of non-Europeans on economic grounds. The changes of 1956–57 were not a renunciation of total exclusion but a continuation of the policy of allowing the entry of a few Asians there had simply been a shift in the category of those admitted.

Between 1950 and 1955, several hundred Asians were admitted on temporary permits, although the numbers were gradually being reduced. In 1954 approximately 43 per cent of the Asians admitted held menial positions as cooks and assistants in cafés, stores and market gardens, mainly in the Chinese community.<sup>57</sup> As part of the 1956 changes it became more difficult for those in menial occupations and for small-scale traders to gain entry. For merchants wishing to stay in or enter Australia, the annual turnover requirement was increased by twentyfold, from £500 to £10 000; for a merchant wanting to introduce an assistant the turnover requirement was also increased, from £2000 to £20 000. The impact of these changes was marked: in 1957, 209 traders held temporary entry permits, but by

1965 there were only 114; the number of assistants with temporary entry permits fell from 1241 in 1953 to 418 in 1965.<sup>58</sup>

In keeping with moves to soften the harsh face of racist immigration policy, the dictation test was abolished in 1958. The change held no implications for policy, and it is a comment on the sanctity of the 1901 legislation—part of the founding charter of the nation—that it was not abolished years earlier. For decades admission had been on the basis of an entry permit granted at the discretion of the minister. The requirements for the grant of a permit were not specified, nor were reasons given when entry was denied. The dictation test served as a reserve power, primarily used to facilitate a conditional entry policy under which the government could deport 'undesirables' by giving them a test which they would fail, although there was no reason why this rather than some other device was employed.

Perhaps the most significant change in the 1950s was the breaching of the principle that non-Europeans were barred from naturalisation and full membership of the Australian community. In October 1956 the non-European spouses of Australian citizens and some others became eligible on a non-discriminatory basis;<sup>59</sup> in 1957 a wider group of non-Europeans became eligible after fifteen years residence. Discrimination remained, however, since British citizens could gain registration as Australian citizens after twelve months and Europeans after five years; further, non-Europeans were subjected to more stringent English language tests and had to demonstrate involvement in 'normal Australian life' to become eligible for naturalisation. This change, limited though it was, had an important practical consequence, for citizens had the right to introduce their spouses or fiancés and children under the age of sixteen. The 1957 change was of immediate significance for people who had been resident in 1942 or earlier, mainly Chinese, as Table 6.2 shows. Most of those admitted in the postwar period did not become eligible until the early 1960s.

In the late 1950s there was no sense that the racially discriminatory immigration policy was anything but reasonable, one that was in the best interests of the country and should be maintained. It was felt necessary, however, to try to convince international opinion that the policy was not racially motivated.

A paper prepared in the late 1950s by the department of immigration to explain and defend the policy argued that 'racial prejudice has never been a factor in the deliberations of Australian Governments, before or after Federation'.<sup>60</sup> A later version stated that there



**Table 6.2 Country of former citizenship of persons granted Australian citizenship by naturalisation, 1954-65**

	China	India	Indonesia	Japan	Malaysia	Philippines	Sri Lanka
1954							
1955							
1956		1				4	
1957		72		25		2	
1958		200	19	67		9	
1959		364	6	110		3	
1960		522	26	89		4	
1961		609	17	97		5	
1962		512	30	80		15	
1963		445	79	21	53	27	13
1964		320	97	14	44	55	8
1965		338	159	9	39	71	10

Source: Department of Immigration *Australian Immigration. Consolidated Statistics No. 9*, 1977, pp. 80-6.

was 'not the slightest suggestion that Europeans are a superior race to others'. In a similar vein, in 1959 the minister for immigration, A.R. Downer, argued that:

To describe our Immigration policy in such a sweeping generalisation as 'White Australia' is misleading. It imparts an innuendo of racial superiority, which in truth is absent from our natural attitude to foreigners. Few people are less conscious of differences of race and colour than contemporary Australians . . . Many Oriental politicians regard our policy with equanimity. Each of them has experienced the irreconcilable interests of peoples of mixed races living together.<sup>61</sup>

The argument that race mixture inevitably resulted in conflict was increasingly used to defend policy. Also in 1959, prime minister Menzies explained the policy in the following terms:

It is our national desire to develop in Australia a homogeneous population in order that we may avert social difficulties which have arisen in many other countries. It is clearly the right of any nation to determine its own racial constitution . . . We have witnessed many examples of nations in which a mixture of races has given rise to deep prejudices and almost insoluble social questions . . . Our policy . . . is not based upon any idea of racial superiority. We willingly recognise that citizens of other nations possess abilities and traditions which we sincerely respect and admire . . . We are . . . a friendly people *not given to making distinctions among people on grounds of race or religion*.<sup>62</sup>

At this time a semi-literate, unskilled European with no English had a good chance of admission into Australia; a Chinese labourer in Hong Kong with contacts in the Sydney Chinese community had some chance, although much less than twenty years earlier; an Oxford-educated Asian professional faced almost insuperable barriers. From 1957 to mid-1964 a total of 73 Asians were admitted (on temporary residence permits) in the 'distinguished and highly qualified' category.<sup>63</sup> Not surprisingly, government spokesmen did not make much of this liberalisation in their defence of Australian policy.

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- 97 Bailey 'Legal Position of Foreigners' pp. 40-1
- 98 *York Empire and Race* pp. 158, 160
- 99 Wendy Lowenstein (ed.) *Weevils in the Flour. An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia* East Brunswick: Scribe, 1978, 1981, p. 66
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- 101 K.H. Kennedy 'The South Johnstone Strike and Railway Lockout, 1927' *Labour History* 31, 1976, p. 3
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- 103 D. Menghetti 'Italians in North Queensland' in Jupp *The Australian People* p. 601; *Sydney Morning Herald* 12, 13 June 1930
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- 105 Mercer 'Survival of a Pacific Islander Population' p. 269; see also the statement of the general secretary of the AWU, Grayndler, *Australian Worker* 1 April 1925 p. 3
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- 118 Vamplew *Australians. Historical Statistics* p. 4
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- 5 *Digest. Report of Proceedings of Australia's Third Citizenship Convention, 1952*, p. 10
- 6 *ibid.* 1955 p. 6 (Sir William Slim)
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- 43 Dr Charles Price has kindly clarified this and some other issues in this section
- 44 20 August 1957, A 1838/2, 581/1, pt 5
- 45 Apparently on the basis of an estimate made within the department of immigration (see for example, 'The Policy for the Admission of Persons of Mixed Race', August 1964, para. 21, immigration file 250469, not yet transferred to Australian Archives) and presented in a background paper to members of parliament, it was asserted on a

- number of occasions in the mid-1960s that 10 000 'mixed-blood' immigrants had come from Sri Lanka alone, 'largely' since the war. This figure was also cited by Palfreeman (p. 49), although it seems incorrect. Over the years 1945-66 a total of 6769 immigrants gave Sri Lanka as the country of their last residence; for the same period, 3295 gave Sri Lanka as the country of their citizenship. Presumably these are overlapping categories: most of those of Sri Lankan citizenship would have given Sri Lanka as the country of their last residence, and not all of these immigrants would have been of 'mixed blood'. These suppositions are supported by the 1966 census, which enumerated 5562 persons born in Sri Lanka.
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  - 52 10 February 1954, A1838/2, 156/4, pt 1
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