White Australia

Forming a racially pure democracy

Making sure it's whites only...

1901 - The new Parliament’s first enacted piece of legislation restricts immigration

The new Australian nation would be white - fear of any "dilution" of racial purity was one of the most important public rationales for Federation. Livingstone Hopkins’ 1902 Bulletin portrayal of the imagined undesirable outcome of letting non-whites into Australia, shows a number of different ethnic groups declining into savagery around the Christmas party table of the future unless it is Europeans only - and preferably British.

The new Commonwealth Parliament in 1900 was extremely anxious to ensure that its sense of the racial future of Australia would be realised - a white nation under the southern skies. There were many elements of this vision, but a key component can be found in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the first piece of legislation that the new Parliament would enact.

Today we view this idea of the world as racist, for it assumes the superiority of one group - defined in a broad sense by the "colour" of peoples' skins or their countries of origin - over all others, and then goes on to exclude people who do not fit the assumptions of acceptability. Yet at the time there was quite widespread support for the view that Australia should be a whites-only society. The British government did not support the new moves, for it presided over a multi-racial Empire - Indians, Africans, Malays, and dozens of other ethnicities and nations - and was engaged in political relations of some complexity with China and particularly Japan. The British government was concerned not to alienate the Emperor of Japan, with whom it was seeking an alliance. Australia was pressured to avoid excluding Japanese from northern Australia, where they were important in the pearl diving industry.

All the colonies had brought in legislation to control Chinese immigration by about 1890, both to prevent competition on the goldfields and then to ensure cheap Asian labour did not intrude into manufacturing. This was despite the fact that, for instance, the market gardens for fresh vegetables in eastern Australia were almost totally dependent on Chinese gardeners. It was the strength of the Australian labour movement of the time that allowed the whole orientation of the new migration environment to be shaped by its desire to prevent competition from non-white workers.

In general, non-Europeans could not immigrate to Australia. The Act used an indirect method to exclude people on the basis of their incapacity to pass a dictation test in any language decided by a migration officer. This meant that the government could avoid saying that "coloured" Africans or Asians or Pacific Islanders were excluded - the test seemed to be fair and equal for all, but in fact was only used against non-whites, or Europeans who were politically suspect.

The Kanakas of Queensland, the indentured labourers who had helped to build the sugar industry, were for the most part "repatriated", effectively deported to their islands of origin, even though many had homes and families in Australia. Those who remained, and the Chinese and other Asians (such as the Japanese in the pearl industry) who had managed to stay in Australia, were prevented from bringing in wives.
and families (by an amendment to the Act in 1903) - with the expectation that their "race" would in time die out.

Controls also existed on who was entitled to vote (Asians, Africans, and Indigenous Australians were not), while there were also restrictions on access to various entitlements. In general the environment was designed to ensure non-whites knew they were marginal, subordinate and unwanted, even if they had to be tolerated in the current generation.

Further references:


