

Whitlam Government 1972 - 1975: “My government liberalised Australia’s immigration laws...”

Whitlam, G, The Whitlam Government 1972-1975, Melbourne, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1985, pp 501-505.

Chapter 13 - Migrants

Excerpts

My Government liberalised Australia’s immigration laws by:

- making available for the first time assisted passage services to non-Europeans. The number of non-Europeans settling in Australia increased to an average 20,000 per annum during our term in office;...
- terminating the specialist privileges and conditions enjoyed by British citizens in Australia by way of easier attainment of citizenship, visas, re-entry permits and voting qualifications;
- repealing the section of the *Migration Act* which retained the old discrimination against Aboriginal Australians and required them to seek special permission to leave the country;...

In April 1973 Grassby introduced the *Australian Citizenship Bill* to establish uniform laws of citizenship...

Prior to 1973, persons of non-European descent were ineligible for citizenship until they had been resident in Australia for five years, although many people of European descent could qualify for citizenship after one year’s residence. My Government abolished this provision. Non-Europeans qualified for citizenship under the same terms as other migrants, after three years’ residence. Grassby

summarised the guiding principle of the legislation in his second reading speech to the Parliament:

There should not be discrimination between different groups of settlers seeking to join the family of the nation. Wherever they were born, whatever their nationality, whatever the colour of their complexion, they should all be able to become Australian citizens under just the same conditions. If we are to maintain our great tradition that every citizen should be equal before the law, it is surely essential that everyone seeking to become a citizen, after being lawfully admitted for residence in Australia, should find they are equally treated when they try to become citizens.

...We abolished the Department and amalgamated it with the Department of Labour after the 1974 elections. I explained at a meeting of the Good Neighbour Council in Adelaide on 13 July 1974 that we had abolished the Department because in our view the Federal Government’s responsibility for migrants did not end with recruiting them, which had been the responsibility of the Department of Immigration, but extended into all the areas where my Government had taken initiatives, such as education and health and urban services...

In education, additional resources were allocated to the migrant program. In August 1973 Grassby introduced the *Immigration (Education) Act* to provide, as an emergency measure under the child migrant education program, supplementary classroom accommodation in schools with special programs for migrant children...

In social welfare, Government tackled the

problem of migrant alienation from existing services. In migrant communities in all States, 48 multilingual welfare officers were employed to overcome social isolation of underprivileged groups...

In communications, the government removed the limitations on the amount of non-English language programming on radio and television and established the experimental ethnic radio stations 2EA and 3EA in Melbourne. A working party was appointed to establish standards for the profession of interpreting and translating and to recommend ways of accrediting interpreters and translators. Emergency telephone interpreter services were also initiated in all community languages...

As Prime minister, I was deeply concerned that Australia had failed to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination...The UN General Assembly had adopted this Convention on 7 March 1966. Australia had signed it on 13 October 1966. It had entered into force with the accession or ratification of 27 states by 4 January 1969. When my Government was elected the Convention had been ratified by 87 countries but still not by Australia...

My government determined that Australia should join the majority of the countries of the world in outlawing racial discrimination...

I appointed [Al] Grassby Special Consultant to the Government on Community Relations and gave him a brief, *inter alia*, to work with Attorney-General [Lionel] Murphy in drafting the Bill to outlaw racial discrimination and to enable Australia to ratify the Convention.

The Bill was introduced into the Senate on 31 October 1974...and the *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975 was proclaimed on 31 October 1975.