

Whitlam Government 1972 - 1975: Immigration Policy and Al Grassby

Whitlam, G. The Whitlam Government 1972-1975, Melbourne, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1985, pp 497-500.

Chapter 13 - Migrants

Excerpts

In October and November 1971 the ALP launched a “mini campaign” in preparation for the 1972 Federal elections. On 24 October I launched our immigration policy in Perth. I commenced my address to the local press club by outlining the three alterations to the ALP immigration platform made by the 1971 Federal Conference:

We removed the assertion that a primary national objective must be to increase population. We removed the commitment to expand the immigration program. We related our immigration needs simply to the capacity of Australia to provide “employment, housing, education and social services” - in other words a very specific instruction to the incoming Labor Government that people, the welfare of people, the people already here and the people who may come, must be the prime consideration, not mere numbers. And thirdly we said unequivocally that there must be no discrimination on grounds of race or colour or nationality.

...It was the concern of my Government that Australia should show a clean face to the world in terms of racial matters. In a world increasingly hostile to any form of discrimination, Australia’s racial discrimination in migration policy and in the internal administration of government, business and even trade unions had emerged as a cause of concern at home and negative reactions abroad, particularly in South East Asia. My government gave first priority to measures to redress injustices against Aboriginal Australians which had spanned the two centuries since European settlement. Our next priority was to ensure that

Australia was racially tolerant in immigration policies and supplied the ethnic population with adequate community services. These tasks were initially entrusted to the reformist capacities of [Al] Grassby.

Following four years as the Member for Murrumbidgee in the NSW Parliament, Grassby stood for the Federal seat of Riverina at the 1969 elections. His winning swing of 22 percent remains a record in the history of Australian Federal politics. In December 1972 he retained the seat and became the Minister for Immigration. His record for electoral and parliamentary achievement was widely respected on both sides of politics in the Riverina. His service in the immigration portfolio evoked the respect and confidence of his parliamentary colleagues and the emotion and adulation of Australia’s migrant population.

At the elections of May 1974, events turned stunningly sour for Grassby. He became the only Minister in my Government to lose his seat, a mishap which stunned the nation. Even more surprising to most Australians, however, were the events associated with the Riverina election, subsequently described by Dr James Warburton of Adelaide University in the *South Australian Journal of Social, Political and Cultural Comment* as “the most intensive and virulent and racist campaign yet recorded in Australia”.

The rationale for the racist campaign stemmed from the reforms introduced by Grassby in the areas of immigration, emigration, citizenship and services to non-English speaking Australians. The replacement of racially discriminatory citizenship and migration laws with uniform procedures equally applicable to all was opposed by racist reformists. These people and their groups who had pressured Ministers, members of parliament and

community leaders for years to maintain discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, ethnic background or descent, commenced a frenzy of activity. They had been used to getting their own way through the exertion of overt and covert pressures upon the process of government decision making, lobbying opinion, distributing pamphlets and bombarding the media with racist propaganda. Now they faced a reformist who not only persisted in raising issues associated with discrimination but who actually sought to eliminate all forms of discrimination through legislative and administrative action. The extremists determined that the most effective means of terminating my Government's policy of racial tolerance was to terminate Grassby's political career...