

Perspective 1 June 2005 - Gwenda Tavan

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Successive immigration controversies since the early 1980s have prompted claims that despite its official abolition, White Australia still has a residual influence.

Some commentators suggest a conspiracy has surrounded non-European immigration, with political leaders using secrecy and dissemblance to circumvent public discussion and consent. Controversial independent MP Pauline Hanson was one such supporter of this viewpoint, claiming in 1996 that 'for far too long ordinary Australians have been kept out of any debate by the major parties' and suggesting that they were now 'in danger of being swamped by Asians'.

The evidence suggests White Australia's dismantling was a complex, contested but inevitable response to changing circumstances that was accepted by a majority of Australians. The policy's longevity was due to many factors: racial arrogance and a racially infused conception of national identity, strategic insecurities and a desire to protect Australian living standards.

Many of these factors were gradually undermined after World War II. Racial discrimination was increasingly unacceptable in a world coming to terms with the consequences of Nazi racial ideology and the collapse of white colonial empires. The policy was at odds with Australian attempts to strengthen ties in the Asia region, and to fuel post-war economic growth through mass immigration.

Slowly, cautiously and in an ad hoc manner, governments began to ease immigration restrictions. In 1956-57 non-Europeans who had resided in Australia for more than 15 years were granted citizenship rights. "Mixed race" migration was liberalised in 1964, although prime minister Robert Menzies resisted the suggestions of senior bureaucrats that further reform was necessary.

More decisive changes took place in 1966 when the Holt government made non-Europeans eligible for admission and permanent residence, dependent upon their capacity for "ready integration into the Australian community", and having useful qualifications and skills. Holt defended the reforms on the grounds of Australia's strengthening relationship with Asian countries, and the desire that immigration policy be administered "with a spirit of humanity and good sense".

Non-European settlement increased rapidly after that, from about 3500 a year to almost 10,000 in 1971. However, successive coalition governments failed to publicly renounce "the established policy" and racial double standards remained at the heart of Australian immigration policy. As South Australian premier Don Dunstan sneeringly suggested in 1971, '[Immigration] officers ... are scouring the wilds of Armenia looking for non-English speaking Turks who will give the right reaction to a light meter ... At the same time, they are refusing to allow as migrants educated English-speaking Chinese from Singapore and other neighbouring countries'.

Not surprisingly, in the face of continuing discrimination against non-Europeans, international and domestic controversy continued in the early 1970s. It was left to the Whitlam Labor government to implement the final phase of the dismantling.

The White Australia policy was abolished with the knowledge and consent of the Australian people. Officials suppressed news of some reforms, the 1956 and 1957 changes in particular. The changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s occurred in the context of a protracted and very public debate about immigration reform, and were well publicised. The policy 'is dead', declared Al Grassby, Whitlam's immigration minister, in 1973. 'Give me a shovel and I will bury it'.

The dismantling was in step with public demands. Pockets of resistance remained in the early '70s. Still, most accepted the changes. If opinion polls can be believed, more comprehensive reform would have been tolerated in the early '60s if the Menzies government had been prepared to act. There was no political backlash against the Holt and Whitlam reforms.

In contrast, changes to immigration policy after the late '70s appeared more radical, allowing an unprecedented number of non-Europeans to settle and seemingly altering the ethnic-racial character of Australian society. As a result, they proved more controversial. The White Australia doctrine still has some appeal, manifested in successive immigration controversies since the early '80s. Race remains the skeleton in the closet. But racism alone does not dictate popular attitudes towards immigration, and never has. Other factors are important, including economic, strategic and cultural considerations. The role of political leaders is also crucial.

The principle lesson of the dismantling of the White Australia policy is the need for decisive, responsible and ethical leadership in regards to sensitive immigration and "race" issues, and a willingness to consistently engage with and educate the public.

Publications:

The Long, Slow Death of White Australia

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