

## **WHITE AUSTRALIA 1901: THE MORAL DEBATE**

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The immigration concept known as the White Australia Policy was formalised when the Federal Parliament passed acts restricting immigration and the use of kanaka labour. The Immigration Restriction Act exemplified the concept of a White Australia because it unified the States' immigration policies and presented a defined policy toward the non-white world.

The concept of a White Australia has been criticised and defended by many people and from different perspectives. Many of its supporters justified it as a protection for the jobs and wages of Australian workers. Contemporary historians, such as Humphrey McQueen, have presented the standard argument, which has as its basic assumption that racism, as evidenced by the White Australia Policy, is absolutely wrong.<sup>1</sup> Others, like A.T. Yarwood, have refrained from condemning the policy or glorifying anti-racist reformers. Yarwood has stressed the need to understand the policy within the standards of the time.<sup>2</sup>

It is the purpose of this article to compare the speeches and assumptions of the major figures in the debate on the Immigration Restriction Bill and examine them according to moral perspectives and a Christian framework. Morality is basically the set of principles or the set of ethics which guide a person to distinguish between what is right and wrong. Morality can be portrayed as relative or absolute to somewhere in between according to the person's overall belief system.

Racism is that tendency toward racial feeling which by highlighting the differences between different racial groups promotes antagonism and conflict.

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It should be noted that without a moral perspective or basis, it is impossible to determine if racism is actually good or bad. Moves to restrict the immigration of Asians stemmed from a reaction to the Chinese presence on the goldfields and in business. The historical and theoretical foundations for this reaction and its generalisation to non-Whites had essentially been laid by the British colonists.<sup>3</sup> Colonists were instrumental because their own immigration to Australia developed from the ideals of white supremacy and continuity in racial purity. During the development of the colony, British perspectives on race and morals dominated. The new country was seen as “a new Britannia” (McQueen’s apt title).

Though white Australians could see no difficulties with continuing immigration from Britain, they were concerned about the implications for the wider British Empire and its large non-white base. The solution was simple, encourage immigration from Britain and discourage it from any non-white part of the Empire and non-white countries. This solution was enacted by the colonies in various forms (though there was some dispute by Queensland about the use and status of Kanaka labourers and Japanese) and by the 1890s it was evident that there was an almost unanimous desire for a White Australia Policy.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to determine how much influence the White Australia movement had on the Federation movement, but it is interesting to note that the first two acts which were not concerned with the business framework both dealt with the nation’s immigration policy. The basic discussion on the Bill was concerned with the method of the restriction, rather than opposition to it.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly many politicians believed that it was a logical step to define the national immigration policy. It did indeed give the new nation a united front and indicated the state’s “common idealism”. The Act used a language-based test similar to the Natal Restriction Act. Under its terms, a dictation test could be given to any person to applied to enter the country.

In Australia, the test was initially proposed in English, but Parliament decided in favour of a European language.<sup>6</sup> In 1905 the test was changed in order that the applicant could be asked in “any prescribed language”. This gave the language



tester a large degree of control over who became an immigrant and decreased the complaints of the Japanese about European bias.<sup>7</sup>

In *A New Britannia*, Humphrey McQueen presents the standard anti-racist interpretation of the White Australia Policy. McQueen's position is linked to the theoretical perspective of moral idealism. This perspective allows for moral judgements to be made because of the underlying assumption that there is a right and a wrong. The idealist stresses the perfect base of concepts that elevate humanity and human purpose to a higher level of being. The ideals that McQueen assumes are good and true, include the need to combat racism and the right to promote equality and our common humanity. McQueen does not approve of a moral perfectionism which is not practically oriented.<sup>8</sup> After all, he is a Marxist.

Interestingly, Manning Clark, in the foreword to *A New Britannia*, notes that McQueen is one of the new left group who specialise in examining individuals who are "tainted by racism". McQueen does not hesitate to examine and use the speeches and opinions of individuals like J.C. Watson and C.H. Pearson, to illustrate the racist dimension in Australian life. Essentially McQueen has a hatred of racism, and like Manning Clark, begrudgingly admits that the Labor Party and socialist radicals were as racist as their liberal conservative counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

McQueen notes that the (then) Federal Labor Party based its racist ideas on an enlightened belief in white racial and moral superiority.<sup>10</sup> This stands in contrast to the Labor Party of today, which firmly rejects the White Australia base of the Labor Party and promulgates instead a policy of multiculturalism. Indeed, one of the Labor folk heroes in the Whitlam Government (several years after they had officially rejected the White Australia Policy), was Al Grassby (then Minister for Immigration). Grassby was popularly known as the "energetic apostle" in the fight against the barriers of racism. A suitable biblical reference?

McQueen mentions a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend James Ronald, a Victorian MP and unashamed supporter of the White Australia Policy.<sup>11</sup> McQueen implies that the minister's view, namely that there are inferior races, would, or should conflict with his title of Reverend. Here McQueen's point loses

its force, because he does not examine any biblical arguments or perspectives, he just assumes that religious people should not hold this view. It would have been more appropriate to examine reasons why a Minister of Religion should not have these views. It may have been that Ronald was arguing from a reasoned and established perspective which has biblical foundation. McQueen has made the standards and perspectives of his own time the absolute reference point, without realising that political figures in 1901 did the same thing. He condemns on the basis of the enlightened anti-racism of today.

McQueen's position has also been criticised because he does not consider conditioning factors. Where is the detailed analysis of the historical and geopolitical context of the White Australia Policy and his sympathetic examination of those politicians who were caught in the supposed prejudices of the period?

A.T. Yarwood examines this point and presents the beginnings of the standard relativist position. Yarwood points out that today "... we experience some difficulty in viewing the attitudes of early twentieth century Australians in the context of their times".<sup>12</sup> Immigration was a major issue for Australians brought up on a foundation of a White Australia. Any criticism or attack on restrictive immigration policies would have been seen to be "as demented as an attack on the early closing of shops".<sup>13</sup>

The "context of their times" also means accepting that there was a fear of an Asian invasion and accepting the usual promotion of the empty unpopulated Australian land mass as barren, though of course this last point was extremely suspect since the fertile part of Australia was still larger than Japan, which had several times the population.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, relativists stress the practical base of a policy. In the case of the White Australia Policy, relativists would argue that it was a positive policy because of the economic threat to labour at the time. It was right for people then, just as it is wrong for people today. A relativist position is linked to a certain time and situation.



The main problem which arises with relativism is that if it is followed to its logical conclusion, there is no viable basis for the initial assumption that something is right or wrong in a particular situation or at a particular time. There is ultimately no way of knowing the truth, because to know what is right is to assume an absolute and is thus a contradiction of relativism.

The other significant problem with relativism is that even at a particular time and place, like the Australia of the early twentieth century, there are people who have views different from those generally accepted as the morally right views and these views will perhaps come to be similar to what Australians may have accepted as reasonable several decades later.

Several figures in the 1901 debates, presented radically different views from those of the majority. It is usually thought that the debate during the passing of the Immigration Restriction Bill was only related to the method of exclusion, but this is really a simplified account of the arguments presented.<sup>15</sup> The great majority of parliamentary members certainly did want a White Australia, but there was conflict over how this should be achieved.

The Attorney General, Alfred Deakin, was one of the first to use the argument that because the majority agreed that White Australia was a necessity, it was necessary.<sup>16</sup> It was termed the Monroe Doctrine for the Commonwealth of Australia.<sup>17</sup>

Prime Minister Edmund Barton's summary of the conflict illustrates one of the major moral points promoted during the debate. Barton thought that the Bill created two groups. One group of members who wanted to make the Bill's provisions deal specifically with the exclusion of non-whites and another group who wanted to reject the Bill because they considered it a piece of organised hypocrisy.<sup>18</sup>

The Bill deliberately did not spell out the basis of the restriction because Australia wanted to be sensitive to Britain, with its large non-white empire and also the British links with Japan. In Parliament itself, these reasons were easily brought to the surface and commented upon. The Bill frustrated those members who believed that Australia should not introduce its first essay in international

relations couched in “diplomatic” language designed for misinterpretation. Rather, members like Western Australia Senator Edward Harney wanted the Bill to simply state what was intended. Harney said that

... personally I pretend to no hyper-sensitive morality, to no sanctimonious prudishness, but I certainly do emphatically say that on no pretext whatever, and on no grounds of expediency however meritorious, could I be found voting for any such measure as this, to be administered in any such a way.<sup>19</sup>

A Member from South Australia, Alexander Paynton, stated even more forcefully that “... ever since I have known right from wrong I have been a hater of sham and hypocrisy”.<sup>20</sup>

Edmund Barton is depicted by McQueen as a racist in the same intellectual class as C.H. Pearson.<sup>21</sup> During the 1901 debates, Barton quotes from Pearson’s book, *National Character and Life: A Forecast*, to illustrate the future problems which could arise if Australia did not prevent non-whites from migrating.<sup>22</sup> Barton believed that there was no doctrine of racial equality which meant that there was equality between an English person and a Chinese person. He implied that there are some absolutes which are based on the absolute word ‘never’. Such equality was just never meant to be. It was not reality. Interestingly, he also stated that he did not want to be too precise “... because there is not one amongst these races whom I wish to hurt or wound”.<sup>23</sup>

Though Barton uses words of concern, it was quite obvious that his statement that the Bill showed a “measure of definite and high policy” was related more to his belief in the superiority of white Australians than a practical concern that they not offend those races who could never be equals.<sup>24</sup> The position of Barton is really a form of moral pretension, where a person uses an ideal or a higher purpose to promote their real purpose or policy.

The Member for East Sydney, George Reid (a former State Premier), was a vocal supporter of the White Australia Policy. He continually stressed the need for “straightforward dealing” with the issues.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Barton, however, who wanted to disguise the intent of the Bill, Reid wanted the picture “in black and white”.<sup>26</sup>



Reid (the son of a Presbyterian minister) did not purport to have a higher moral purpose. He provides an excellent example of a politician motivated by the practicalities of the situation. Reid was an advocate of a realist form of morality. He was not a relativist, because he had a very firm absolutist stance on the issues. He knew that the wider community was “... not prone to beating about the bush and diplomatising about preserving Australia from the contamination of undesirable aliens”.<sup>27</sup> By trying to limit the reference to the present, Reid essentially made the values of the community the absolute reference values.

Alfred Deakin, on the other hand, was always sensitive to the impact of his policies on what he terms moral principles. His position prevented him from directly campaigning for a Bill that excluded non-whites. He did not want to offend a friendly or potentially influential power and also claimed he could not support a Bill that was “... contrary to the general conception of equality which has been the guiding principle of British rule throughout the Empire”. As I have already noted, Deakin thought it was necessary to exclude them because the people of Australia had already decided to, but that it had to be done ‘in the most considerate manner possible’.<sup>28</sup>

Deakin proposed the exclusion of Asians (primarily the Japanese) on the basis of their own high abilities.<sup>29</sup> He

... stated from the first that the exclusiveness on the part of the Australian people is perfectly independent of the mental and moral status of the Japanese, when measured by the only standards that can be properly applied to them, namely, those of their own race and of their own history.<sup>30</sup>

Deakin does not condemn, though he does present a moral judgement because the implication behind the idea of incompatibility is that the Japanese standards are not as good as the Australian standards. In a way Deakin was saying that the Japanese were good people who needed to be excluded because for their own good, but as another member commented, if they were so “good”, then they would see through the diplomacy of the Bill.<sup>31</sup>

The Leader of the Federal Labor Party, John Watson, is quoted by McQueen to illustrate the classic racist argument.<sup>32</sup> The argument is based on the supposed threat of contamination which would result from one of our own brothers or sisters succumbing to or even marrying a non-white.<sup>33</sup> Watson elaborates that the Parliament not only needed to look after the present generation, but that it had an obligation to look after future generations.<sup>34</sup> This is similar to another member who stressed that the Parliament had a responsibility for good government, which meant creating a White Australia to ensure the continuation of stable good government.<sup>35</sup>

These arguments are essentially moral because they are based on higher ideals than just contemporary political practicalities. One member, Sir Langdon Bonython, put this argument very succinctly. He argued that the contention that "White Australia" was selfishly based, was simply wrong. "To me it seems to be a policy dictated by commonsense and the highest prudence and based on the best interests of humanity".<sup>36</sup>

The Member for North Melbourne, Henry Higgins, argued that it was morally just to defend the White Australia Policy. Higgins was one of those politicians who preferred "... to state outright that we do not want yellow and black faces in Australia".<sup>37</sup> He argued that if Great Britain was allowed to forestall the French from invading their colonies and other countries to fill with a white presence then Australia "was equally justified in refusing to allow Asiatics to invade our shores".<sup>38</sup>

Though the content of the debate was often tinged with moral perspective, only on two occasions did a concentrated discussion of the morality of the Bill arise. In the House of Representatives, the Member for Parkes, (Arthur) Bruce Smith, and in the Senate, Edward Pulsford from New South Wales, stimulated debate when they introduced arguments based on moral religious grounds. Their views were attacked by other members, most notably King O'Malley.

Smith asserted that a nation was hypocritical if it proclaimed that it was a Christian nation and yet did not live by Christian principles. He argued that because the moral standards of the wider community were derived from Christian standards, then the nation and the parliament was "being put to the test". Smith,



a supporter of Australian connections with Britain, through the Empire League, stated that

... we should remember this when we speak of the open door, of the equality of men, and of our Christian principles; and when at the very moment we are sending forth our people to preach those Christian principles, yet propose to turn round and shut out many of those whom we are seeking to convert to these principles.<sup>39</sup>

Like others, Smith attacked the dishonest nature of the Bill. He valued honesty because he argued that it was the right moral basis and stated that "The honesty of purpose of this Parliament is involved in it".<sup>40</sup>

He also branded the supposed threat of an Asiatic invasion as a fable and went on to expound his view that the basic ingredient of the Bill was racism. Smith argued that the "moral ground" of the Bill was this racism; a desire for a pure race. He then asked what was the basis for accepting racism as a good moral desire. Smith pointed out that non-white cultures had attained high character and culture without perverting and pragmatically abusing the Christian moral code. He questioned why a nation which had the truth did not obey it, instead of twisting the truth to suit their own desires.<sup>41</sup>

It should be noted that Smith, a practical politician, recognised that at least the present Bill was open enough in the final interpretation to let in some non-whites, while too much opposition would achieve little and perhaps mean a more stringent and blatant racial Bill. He "voted for the Bill as the lesser of two evils".<sup>42</sup>

Smith's voting in this manner did not negate his efforts to criticise the Bill, rather it seems to have consolidated support for the Bill as indeed the "lesser of two evils". The introduction of the Bill at this time forestalled the possible development of a considerable degree of racial conflict which it is postulated could have arisen if the new nation had introduced Asian and non-white immigration. This conflict would have been a greater evil than the Bill and probably set back the immigration question even further.

Needless to say, Smith's speech prompted spirited reaction. George Reid did not even try to reply to Smith's questions. He believed that everyone "in his inmost heart" had the same convictions as Reid; it was only they just didn't express them in the same way. He wrote Smith off as the "fly in every pot of ointment".<sup>43</sup> O'Malley had earlier quoted the Christian apologist, Henry Ward Beecher, who had argued in the United States for a true equality between blacks and whites because that was what God intended. O'Malley attempted to ridicule this ideal by suggesting that the pulpit be taken into a Chinese den to determine the real strengths of a person's convictions.<sup>44</sup> Another member for South Australia, V.L. Solomon, continued O'Malley's point by indirectly criticising Smith for his lack of personal involvement with Kanaka workers in Queensland, asking who would "do the Christian work of lifting them out of the mire".<sup>45</sup>

It seemed that the politicians were more interested in portraying racial stereotypes than seriously interacting with the Christian dimension of Smith's argument. Later in the debate, Senator James MacFarlane from Tasmania said that he was "... quite sure that a great deal of our racial hatred and prejudice to many of these poor people is owing to want of knowledge".<sup>46</sup> The Minister for Defence, Sir John Forrest, in a surprisingly sermon-type speech, presented a very interesting exposition of the story of Naaman, the leper. He compared the leprosy to the great evil of Australia being flooded with Asiatics. Forrest argued that it was necessary to stop this danger at once.<sup>47</sup> Senator MacFarlane reacted to this speech, calling any reference to an Asiatic invasion a "parrot cry" which people used to promote the idea of a White Australia and distort the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.<sup>48</sup>

Senator Pulsford quoted Australia's first Governor-General, who "prayed that her people might take a broad and liberal view of the responsibilities and duties, which the functions of Empire imposed upon them". He prayed that, in common with all sections of the British race, Australians might prove a bulwark for liberty, for Christianity, for peace, for goodwill towards mankind. Pulsford forcefully stated his principles, declaring

I am perfectly willing that they should be called my friends and I hope so long as God gives me breath, that I shall have the courage to stand up for what I consider to be right for them, as I shall stand



up for what I consider to be right for myself and for any other person.

Pulsford continued, asking how could this country

Send missionaries from Australia to the islands of the Pacific, and then when native teachers pass through Australia on their way to New Guinea put them practically in quarantine?

It is worth noting that Pulsford's father had formerly been a Baptist minister.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to consider that Smith and Pulsford were not in favour of unrestricted immigration, but they were prepared to accept immigration from all areas, believing that this was the basis for a Christian country; to do otherwise was to court charges of hypocrisy.

Pulsford was also deeply concerned with promoting relationships between countries and knew that racially based immigration policies raised antagonism rather than friendship. Pulsford's view, however, were vigorously attacked by Labor Senator G.F. Pearce, the Chairman of Committees. Pearce stated that he had no sympathy with a person who believed in the equality of all people. He believed that the Parliament had a mandate to legislate for a White Australia and to do it quickly.<sup>50</sup> For Pearce it was a purely racial question. Non-whites were "subject fellows", rather than "fellow citizens". Because this was fact, Pearce concluded that whites had a higher racial base and moral superiority.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, Pearce did not provide any justification for this extraordinary conclusion.

The main political figures involved in the debate displayed a variety of theoretical positions, though some of them had less developed frameworks than others. Two positions dominated the debate: the moral realist position taken by people like Deakin and the moral idealist position, which was promoted by Smith and others.

Moral realism provided the foundation for the White Australia Policy. It was a practical matter. Things are much easier if all the people come with the same cultural baggage. Deakin summarised the argument when he stated that

The White Australia Policy covers much more than the presence of our own people here. It means the multiplication of our own people so that we may defend our country and our policy. It means the maintenance of social conditions under which men and women can live decently. It means equal laws and opportunities for all ...<sup>52</sup>

It meant that the most drastic measures were not introduced, but that a practically-oriented morality provided the continuing basis of immigration policy for the nation. The politicians who opposed the idealistic arguments believed that “the crusading spirit is impractical and ignores the best possible solution, which is the best moral choice which circumstances permit”.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Hancock, in commenting on the Immigration Restriction Act stated that “the majority of Australians were not rhetoricians (those against the Natal style of discrimination), but practical people”.<sup>54</sup>

The danger with emphasising practical morality is that moral frameworks can be easily discarded in favour of moral cynicism. Though the White Australia Policy may have been regarded as a moral policy, the belief in its supposed moral base only thinly covered its racial and economic foundations. This was evident in the debate in the speeches of O'Malley, Reid and others and it was one of the disturbing aspects which Smith, MacFarlane and Pulsford objected to. They believed that many individuals did not seriously examine their positions, and followed without realising the majority opinion of the time. They also strongly objected to the Bill being wrapped in a moral cloak with a Christian undergarment in order to give it a wider standing.

On the level of practical morality, it seems that Smith, MacFarlane and Pulsford had profoundly more morally realistic views than the others of their day because their views are now accepted today. However, it is important to note that the reason they had different views (especially at a time when they were unpopular), was that their views were based on a wider or universal set of moral principles which they had gleaned from the Bible.

This examination of the White Australia Policy has highlighted the delicate area of historical judgement. How do we judge? By the standards of our day or by the standards of the then dominant group in parliament? It seems from this



discussion that there needs to be a better basis than either of these. Examining community standards provides an understanding of the philosophies and perspectives which underlie the standards, but it does not enable a particular moral judgement to be made.

## END NOTES

1. H. McQueen, *A New Britannia* (Penguin: Melbourne, 1980).
2. A.T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia, 1896-1923* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1976). Also see J. London, *Non White Immigration and the White Australia Policy* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1970), p. 4, for an examination of the impact of the uniqueness of Australia's historical and geographical context.
3. M. Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1978), p. 205.
4. M. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol. V (Melbourne University Press: Carlton, 1981), pp. 131-32; 291-92.
5. Yarwood, pp. 5; 21-22.
6. D. Horne, *The Australian People* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), p. 166.
7. Yarwood, pp. 22, 157.
8. McQueen, p. 42.
9. McQueen, p. 8, 47-54; Clark, p. 190.
10. McQueen, p. 53.
11. *ibid.*
12. Yarwood, pp. 22-23.

13. Horne, p. 159.
  14. See M. Willard, pp. 210-11; J. H. Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: S.C.M., 1924), p. 131.
  15. *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, Session 1901-2, Vols 1-12, Senate and House of Representatives [hereafter *CPD*], p. 5810.
  16. *ibid.*
  17. *ibid.*, p. 4807.
  18. *ibid.*, pp. 3500-1.
  19. *ibid.*, p. 7165.
  20. *ibid.*, p. 5808.
  21. McQueen, p. 53.
  22. *CPD*, p. 3505.
  23. *ibid.*, p. 5233.
  24. *ibid.*, pp. 3497, 5233.
  25. *ibid.*, p. 5167.
  26. *ibid.*, p. 5814.
  27. *ibid.*, p. 5329.
  28. *ibid.*, pp. 4811-12. For a discussion on the role of Deakin in the early stages of the parliament see R. Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth* (Melbourne, 1975).
  29. *CPD.*, pp. 4812, 5157.
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30. *ibid.*, p. 5819.
31. *ibid.*, p. 5806.
32. McQueen, p. 47.
33. *CPD*, p. 4633.
34. *ibid.*, pp. 5177-78.
35. *ibid.*, p. 5065.
36. *ibid.*, p. 5071.
37. *ibid.*, p. 5077.
38. *ibid.*, p. 4656.
39. *ibid.*, p. 5154.
40. *ibid.*, pp. 5185, 5569.
41. *ibid.*, pp. 5160, 5163.
42. *ibid.*, p. 5154.
43. *ibid.*, pp. 5167, 5329.
44. *ibid.*, p. 4638.
45. *ibid.*, p. 5246.
46. *ibid.*, p. 7185.
47. *ibid.*, p. 5267. The biblical reference is 2 Kings 5.
48. *CPD*, p. 7159.

49. *ibid.*, pp. 7156, 7159.
50. *ibid.*, pp. 7160, 7163.
51. *ibid.*, pp. 7240, 7249.
52. M. Willard, *op.cit.*, p. 204.
53. F.W. Thompson, 'Practical Morality and Prudence', *Australian Outlook*, December 1979, pp. 278-79.
54. W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), p. 78.