

# The new "White Australia" Policy

## Part 3

**Mike Head**  
26 January 1999

*The Australian government's decision to refuse a visitor's visa to Rajendiram Sutharsan, a Tamil member of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, is part of a wider crackdown against not only visitors but also refugees and immigrants from Sri Lanka and other impoverished, particularly Asian, countries.*

*Inquiries by the World Socialist Web Site have confirmed that a virtual blanket exclusion applies to visitors from a long list of countries--predominantly in Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East, South America and Eastern Europe--whose residents are classified as "risk factors". Moreover, this blacklist is part of a broader exclusion of people from Asia and other impoverished regions, whether they are seeking to visit, apply for refugee status or immigrate.*

### **Part three**

#### **Immigration: discrimination by race and wealth**

According to the Australian government, one of the main accomplishments of its revamped immigration policy since 1996 has been the use of stricter English language tests, combined with tougher skills requirements, to cut the number of people applying to migrate.

Under the heading of "achievements", the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs' web site boasts of a "stronger emphasis on migrants' skills, qualifications and English-language ability, leading to a worldwide reduction in the number of migration applications."

Over the past decade, settler arrivals have almost halved--from 143,490 in 1987-88 to 77,327 in 1997-98. The target for 1998-99 is 68,000. When those who leave the country are taken into account, the net permanent migration rate is today only about one-third the level of 1987-88, falling from 123,669 to 45,342.

Most of those permitted to settle come from predominantly "white" countries. Arrivals from New Zealand, Europe, the former Soviet Union, South Africa

and North America make up about 60 percent of the total. The proportion coming from Southeast Asia has been cut from 20.6 percent to 12.5 percent. In 1987-88, 29,500 people were permitted to immigrate from Southeast Asia; in 1997-98 there were just 9,700.

The use of language and skills tests to discriminate by race and economic status has a specific history in Australia. Until the mid-1960s, when growing dependence on exports to Japan and other Asian markets forced an adjustment, both Labor and conservative governments maintained a "White Australia" policy, restricting immigration to selected people from Europe. Prior to the late 1940s, when the demand for cheap labour motivated a shift, the policy even excluded people from southern Europe, including Italy, Greece and Spain, whose skins were regarded as swarthy.

From the first Immigration Restriction Act passed by the newly-formed Australian parliament in 1901, one of the key means for implementing this racist policy was the infamous "dictation test". Those wishing to immigrate, or even enter the country, had to pass a language examination, conducted in English or any other European language selected by immigration officials.

The Labor Party was the prime mover of this policy. Its federal parliamentary caucus meeting on July 31, 1901 passed two crucial motions. "That the Party work for the total exclusion of coloured people whether British subjects or not," stated one. "That the Party approves of the Educational test as to coloured British subjects, with such amendments as may seem necessary; but opposes absolutely the admission of all coloured aliens," declared the second.

The dictation test was also used for political purposes. The most notorious case was that of Egon Kisch, a Czechoslovakian writer refused entry by the Lyons government to attend an anti-war congress in 1934. The government first sought to exclude Kisch as a communist; then after he jumped ashore from a ship, arrested him and

administered a dictation test. Because Kisch was fluent in many languages--including English--the authorities chose Scottish Gaelic.

The dictation test was formally withdrawn in 1959 and the Labor, Country and Liberal parties removed "White Australia" from their platforms in 1965. But in July 1992, after slashing migrant intakes, the Keating Labor government introduced a test of vocational English proficiency into the points system for screening applicants for entry as skilled migrants.

Since 1996 the current Howard government has built on Labor's lead. In the words of its official handouts, "the focus of the Migration Program has shifted, ensuring it is more closely aligned to Australia's economic interests by delivering people with needed skills and expertise".

Alongside the new English tests, pass marks in skills tests have been raised, in some cases to record levels, to screen out those not wanted. While reducing the annual intake, the government has increased the skilled migration component--designed to directly serve the needs of employers--from 22 percent to more than 50 percent.

In order to do so, it has imposed limits, or caps, on the numbers allowed entry for family reasons. Immigrant families, especially those from Asia and other poorer regions, now face almost insurmountable difficulties sponsoring parents who wish to join them, let alone siblings, other relatives and fiancées. Applications in the latter category have fallen by 45 percent.

New schemes have been introduced to fill much more of the annual quota with business people and personnel recruited by employers.

Under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, companies in regional or remote locations can recruit skilled employees from overseas. Another scheme allows State and Territory governments to sponsor skilled migrants for use in the local workforce. In addition, business people who bring in cash and own an enterprise in a designated regional area for at least two years can then qualify for permanent residency. These new programs effectively establish remote zones where immigrants, whether employees or small business people, must remain for set periods before being permitted to live elsewhere. The government has also expanded the previous Labor government's Employer Nomination Scheme, which gives priority migration processing to employees that companies recruit abroad.

In every respect, the needs of business now dominate. Immigration department offices feature business centres, "providing a comprehensive and streamlined service to

the business community". Free advice is available on how to gain residence for business purposes or recruit selected foreign personnel.

The corporate elite can literally buy their way into the country. If they invest more than \$750,000 into a government security or have net business assets exceeding \$300,000, they qualify for resident status on the grounds of "business skills". Others can quickly obtain Long Stay Business Visas for periods of up to four years. On arrival and departure from Australian airports they receive preferential queuing treatment.

So as not to damage Asian business prospects, the Howard government and its Labor opposition both claim to oppose the anti-Asian racism of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party. Formally, they urge voters to place One Nation last on ballot papers in elections. In reality, their policies--visitors' blacklists, exclusion of refugees, and the revival of "White Australia" language tests--have the same orientation. Moreover, they are responsible for the deteriorating social conditions that have provided fertile ground for extreme right-wing elements such as Hanson who seek to make immigrants, together with Aborigines, the unemployed and welfare recipients, the scapegoats for falling living standards.

Everyone should enjoy, as fundamental democratic rights, the opportunity to travel freely, visit family and friends, meet with people anywhere in the world, and live wherever they choose. For the first time in human history, the technological advances in transport and communication make this feasible. Yet, as the Australian government's policies illustrate, while capital, corporate executives and wealthy individuals move around the globe without barriers, these elementary rights are increasingly denied to the vast majority of ordinary people.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**