

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 3: The doctrine of "White Australia"

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Below we are publishing the third part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The remaining parts are available at the following links: Part 1, Part 2, Part 4, Part 5, Part 6, Part 7, Part 8, Part 9 and Part 10.

For the new Australian ruling class, establishing a federated nation-state required more than forging a relationship with Britain and the Empire, laying out the legal basis for the federal government and delineating its jurisdiction. A national ideology, or identity, had to be developed that could command popular support. Herein lay the crucial role of the doctrine of "White Australia". It provided the ideological cement to hold the new nation-state together, under conditions where deep class divisions had already started to emerge.

The passage of the Immigration Restriction Act was to symbolise what has become known as the "Australian settlement"—the exclusion of non-whites, the protection of the home market through high tariffs, and the regulation of wages and living standards through an industrial arbitration system. The White Australia policy, as the leader of the Liberals in the new parliament, Alfred Deakin, made clear during the parliamentary debate, signified more than just the exclusion of Asians from the new nation. It was to provide Australia's very foundation.

"This note of nationality," he declared, "is that which gives dignity and importance to this debate. The unity of Australia is nothing, if that does not imply a united race. A united race means not only that its members can intermix, intermarry and associate without degradation on either side, but implies one inspired by ideas and an aspiration towards the same ideals, of a people possessing the same general cast of character, tone of thought—the same constitutional training and traditions—a people qualified to live under this Constitution.... Unity of race is an absolute to the unity of Australia. It is more actually in the last resort, than any other unity. After all, when the period of confused local politics and temporary political divisions was swept aside it was this real unity which made the Commonwealth possible." [1]

For Deakin, the White Australia policy was related to far-reaching social questions. "It means the maintenance of social conditions under which men and women can live decently. It means equal laws and opportunities for all ... it means social justice and fair wages. The White Australia policy goes down to the roots of our national existence, the roots from which the British social system has sprung." [2]

White Australia, he was to explain in 1903, was not a surface phenomenon, but a "reasoned policy which goes to the roots of national life, and by which the whole of our social, industrial and political organisation is governed." [3]

Opposition to Indian and Chinese labour

The prevalence of racism was not isolated to the Australian colonies.

Throughout the nineteenth century, racism had become one of the key ideological weapons for the European bourgeoisie as it began to carve the world into spheres of influence and colonies. But what did distinguish Australia was that racism was to become the founding doctrine of the nation, backed by the claim that this was the only basis for social justice.

From the early years of colonial settlement, and particularly as pastoral capitalism grew and wool exports to Britain expanded, racial issues played a central role. The very expansion into new regions of the continent—with the growth of the wool, and then the beef, industry—motivated the frontier wars against the indigenous population. The conflicts commenced in earnest from the mid-1820s and continued well into the twentieth century.

The pastoral industry had no use for tribal Aborigines—they were simply to be cleared from the land, or "dispersed", as the euphemism for shooting them put it. But labour still had to be found. Initially, it came from the convict population, which grew rapidly in the period after 1820. But as agitation against the transportation of convicts from England developed in the 1840s, the pastoralists were forced to turn elsewhere.

Initially, they sought to bring in indentured labourers from India, but this was opposed both in London and in the colony of New South Wales itself. In London, Sir James Stephen, the permanent under-secretary in the Colonial Office, insisted that the continent of New Holland was to be reserved "as a place where the English race shall be spread from sea to sea unmixed with any lower caste. As we now regret the folly of our ancestors in colonising North America from Africa, so should our posterity have to censure us if we should colonise Australia from India." [4]

Within the colony, opposition to Indian indentured labour emanated mainly from self-employed artisans and manufacturers, as well as from small landholders. These emerging colonial capitalists—none of them large—harboured two fears. On the one hand, if the large landholders had access to a ready supply of cheap Indian labour, their economic and political power would vastly increase, exerting pressure on the smaller urban-based bourgeoisie from above. On the other, Indian labourers would form an impoverished proletariat—a permanent underclass—that would increasingly threaten the social interests of the urban bourgeoisie from below.

In the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions in Continental Europe and the rise of the Chartist movement in the 1840s in Britain, the so-called social question was never far from the surface. There were many who feared that conflicts such as these would emerge in the colonies. In January 1857, a leading article in the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus* noted that in England, the contrast between wealth and poverty had created a "dangerous class", as had the tyranny of the European rulers.

"In these old countries arguments are not wanting in favour of a gradual and cautious extension of equal political rights to all citizens. But the social condition of this colony is, thank Heaven! widely different. Here we

have no 'dangerous class'. The number of paupers bears an insignificant proportion to the mass of the community. Every Australian citizen is interested in defending the just rights of property, and the smallest freeholder will as earnestly maintain those rights as the large capitalist who has invested tens of thousands in the soil. The wealthy classes have nothing to fear from manhood suffrage. It will prevent them from abusing their power, but there is no danger of its encroaching upon their rights." [5]

The arguments against Indian labour were applied with even greater force to the Chinese, especially after the gold rushes of the 1850s. If the Chinese were allowed to enter the colony, they would "degrade" the European population. According to the colonial liberals, the establishment of freedom and liberty required a "shared outlook", and that was not possible if the Chinese population grew. Henry Parkes, later to become one of the "founding fathers" of federation, regularly proclaimed that the Chinese threatened "our very existence as a nation". In the late 1850s there were three unsuccessful attempts to pass legislation restricting Chinese immigration, with a fourth eventually proving successful in the wake of the anti-Chinese riots at the gold diggings at Lambing Flat in 1861.

As Parkes' remarks indicate, the nation was, from the outset, defined in exclusionary, racist terms. These tendencies were to intensify over the next period as class antagonisms deepened. By the end of the 1860s, with the end of the gold rushes and the entrenchment of the power of the large landholders, small-scale manufacturing industry was taking root, with a consequent growth in the urban working class. A local patriotism emerged—with calls for the use of home brands and the consumption of locally produced goods. The Australian Natives Association was established in 1871 to promote the claims and virtues of colonial men of importance, over those of immigrants.

At the heart of the emerging nationalist ideology was the conception that a new society, free of the class antagonisms and conflicts of old Europe could be constructed in Australia, with prosperity and social justice for all. But for this to take place two conditions had to be met: the population had to share a common outlook and values and there could be no possibility for the establishment of a "degraded" cheap labour force, which could be used by the wealthy capitalists and landowners to undercut social conditions. This was how racial exclusion became the cutting edge of developing Australian nationalism.

In 1887 the *Bulletin* magazine, one of the most prominent voices for the emerging Australian nationalism, defined Australian identity as follows: "All white men who come to these shores—with a clean record—and who leave behind them the memory of class distinctions and the religious differences of the old world ... are Australian. In this regard all men who leave the tyrant-ridden land of Europe for freedom of speech and right of personal liberty are Australians before they set foot on the ship which brings them hither ... No nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no kanaka, no purveyor of cheap coloured labour is an Australian." [6]

White Australia and the labour movement

White Australia racism was to become the ideological foundation of the alliance between the manufacturing bourgeoisie and the leadership of the growing trade union and Labor movement that was to form the basis of the first Commonwealth governments.

The small manufacturers, whose interests centred on the home market, desired protection from overseas competition on the one hand, and the curbing of the economic and political power of the large-scale pastoral and financial interests on the other. They opposed Asian immigration because it would undermine their own position by augmenting the wealth of the large-scale capitalists.

According to one liberal spokesman, the parliamentarian Dr William Hobbs, "cheap servile labour, particularly non-European labour, would prejudice the development of a progressive democratic society." [7]

Such arguments were buttressed by social Darwinist ideology, which asserted the supremacy of the white race. The one-time education minister of Victoria, C. H. Pearson, claimed in his book *National Life and Character* that a struggle existed between the "higher" and "lower" races of men.

"The fear of Chinese immigration which the Australian democracy cherishes," he wrote, "and which Englishmen at home find it hard to understand is, in fact, the instinct of self-preservation, quickened by experience. We know that coloured and white labour cannot exist side by side; we are well aware that China can swamp us with a year's surplus of population.... We are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live and increase freely, for the higher race." [8]

According to the *Bulletin* magazine, which maintained the slogan "Australia for the White Man" on its masthead until 1961, the "instinct against race-mixture" was rooted in evolution. "Once a type has got a step up it must be 'selfish' in its scorn of lower types, or climb down again. This may not be good ethics. But it is Nature ... the Caucasian race, as a race has taken up the white man's burden of struggling on towards 'the upward path', of striving at a higher rate of evolution.... If he were to stop to dally with races which would enervate him, or inflict him with servile submissiveness, the scheme of human evolution would be frustrated." [9]

For the leaders of the newly-formed Labor Party and trade unions, the struggle for democracy was inseparable from the establishment of a "White Australia". A frequent theme of Labor and radical publications was that it was the wealthy capitalists who supported the entry of "Asiatics" in order to undermine the trade unions and impose poverty on the workers. White Australia, the Brisbane *Worker* claimed in 1901, was the greatest question that could be placed before the people. The process of federation could give birth to a white nation or a "mongrel nation torn with racial dissension. Blighted by industrial war, permeated with pauperism, and governed by cliques of lawyers and bankers and commercial and financial adventurers." [10]

From the outset of the movement for federation in the early 1890s, discussion on the character of the political institutions that would form the new state was linked to the question of White Australia. At a meeting in Sydney in 1893, convened to establish a Federation League, leading members of the Labor Party proposed a series of amendments to the proposals of the meeting organiser, Edmund Barton, for a federated nation. Their amendments included establishing a democratic republic, a federal parliament consisting of only one chamber, one man one vote in all states, the nationalisation of all land, and the abolition of legislative councils (the reactionary state upper houses). They concluded with a call for "the total exclusion of all Asiatics and other aliens whose standard of living and habits of life are not equal to our own, and whose entering into competition with Australian wage-earners is a direct menace to the national welfare." [11]

At the 1901 election, the Labor Party presented itself as the foremost defender of White Australia. In the words of the Labor paper, the *Worker*: "If you are convinced that it is a wrong thing to have a horde of Kanakas and Chows and Afghans coming into this country insulting your wives and daughters, and taking the bread out of white men's mouths, then do not fear to march up to the ballot-box and plump for the Labor candidate.... If you let this chance pass you of getting rid of the Chow and the Kanaka it will be many a long day before you will get another.... Let us remember that the white electors of Australia are at our backs cheering us on. Let us go to the polls like Trojans and win in the name of White Australia." [12]

In 1905, when the federal Labor Party came to formulate its objectives, White Australia nationalism occupied the central place. Labor's primary objective called for: "The elevation of an Australian sentiment based on the maintenance of racial purity and the development in Australia of an enlightened and self-reliant community."

White Australia involved not only the exclusion of immigrants from Asia. It was, as the Labor objective made clear, a doctrine of racial purity. The existing Chinese population, consisting largely of males, was not expected to be able to reproduce itself, while Pacific Island labourers, brought in to work in the Queensland cane fields, were deported. As for the Aborigines, it was anticipated that they would die out, in accordance with the laws of social Darwinism. They constituted, after all, a “lower” race, and, accordingly, were written out of the constitution.

Section 51 of the constitution gave the Commonwealth parliament the power to make laws for peace, order and good government, and provided for the making of special laws with respect to “the people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race in any state.” When population was being calculated in order to determine the size of the various electorates, the decision was that “Aboriginal natives shall not be counted.” This meant that Aborigines would not be included in the census. Nor would they be entitled to Commonwealth pensions and benefits.

White Australia was not simply a racial policy. It lay at the very heart of the social and economic policies of every political party within the new nation-state. And the set of relationships that were thus established—later dubbed the Australian settlement—formed the foundation for the writing of Australian history. The “Australian story” was presented as the transplanting of British ideals and institutions to the other side of the world, the successful passage from colonial status to the achievement of nationhood, and the establishment of advanced social conditions. The Aborigines, who had been the subject of nineteenth century historical accounts, were largely ignored, just as they had been written out of the constitution and the Australian population itself.

To be continued

Notes:

- 1) cited in J. A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin*, pp. 280-281
- 2) cited in Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 204
- 3) cited in Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, p. 148
- 4) cited in Ann Curthoys, “Liberalism and Exclusionism in Jayasuriya” ed., *Legacies of White Australia*, p. 13
- 5) see R. N. Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement*, pp. 39-40
- 6) cited in Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 81
- 7) cited in Kay Saunders, “Conceptualising Race and Labour, 1890-1914” in Mark Hearn and Greg Patmore ed., *Working the Nation*, p. 81
- 8) cited in Andrew Markus, “Immigration and some ‘lessons’ of Australian history” in Markus and Rickelfs ed., *Surrender Australia?* p. 11
- 9) cited in Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. 81-82
- 10) cited in Leanore Layman, “Fighting Fatman Fetteration: Labour Culture and Federation” in Hearn and Patmore, op cit, p. 68
- 11) cited in Stuart Macintyre, “Federation and the Labour Movement” in Hearn and Patmore, op cit, p. 16
- 12) cited in Andrew Markus, “Immigration and some ‘lessons’ of Australian history” in Markus and Rickelfs, op cit, p. 35



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