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

Part 4: From "White Australia" to Geoffrey Blainey

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Below we are publishing the fourth 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 3*,* Part 5*,* Part 6*,* Part 7*,* Part 8*,* Part 9 *and* Part 10*.*

The forging of the "Australian settlement" at the beginning of the twentieth century, based on White Australia, tariff protection and industrial regulation, was to shape the writing of history over the next half-century and more. Australian history became the story of the successful transplanting of British institutions and values to the new land, and their subsequent progress.

In 1933, as Stuart Macintyre notes, the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* dealt with Australia and New Zealand as follows: "The history of both Dominions takes a special character from this comparatively free development of English life transplanted to coasts and islands on the other side of the world." Accounts by the Australian contributors reinforced this interpretation. [1]

The country's Aboriginal population simply disappeared from the historical view—along with any discussion of the impact of colonial settlement upon it. In 1927, Walter Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at Melbourne University, summed up the prevailing attitudes in the introduction to one of his major works:

"Australia is the present home and refuge of creatures, often crude and quaint, that elsewhere have passed away and given place to higher forms. This applies equally to the Aboriginal as to the platypus and the kangaroo. Just as the platypus, laying its eggs and feebly suckling its young, reveals a mammal in the making, so does the Aboriginal show us, as least in broad outline, what every man must have been like before he learned to read and write, domesticate animals, cultivate crops and use a metal tool. It has been possible to study in Australia human beings that remain on the cultural level of men of the Stone Age." [2]

Regarded as a "dying race", Aborigines appeared in Australian history, as J. A. La Nauze observed in 1959, only as a "melancholy anthropological footnote". [3]

White Australia remained entrenched as the foundation stone of the Australian state. Addressing the National Press Club in Washington in 1940, the first Australian ambassador to the US, Richard G. Casey, told his audience that in the past century, Australians had "brought the place up from being a blackfellows' country" to a modern culture. Australia, he said, was like the US, but with one crucial difference. "We are endeavouring to create and maintain a uniform race in Australia—a race which will avoid those difficulties that we believe are inseparable from the mingling of different types of civilisation."

After World War II

But even as Casey was delivering his remarks, events were unfolding which were to completely overturn the political framework within which the Australian nation-state had been founded. Indeed, as his very appointment to the post of US ambassador indicated, Australia was becoming increasingly concerned about Japan's push southwards, and, as a consequence, whether its interests could still be defended by the British Empire. At the end of 1941, Prime Minister John Curtin consummated this shift when he affirmed that Australia would now look primarily to the United States for its defence.

In the aftermath of the war, Australian policymakers confronted new problems. White Australia had been developed within the framework of the empire. But now the security umbrella it had provided was no longer there. The British Empire was being shattered by an eruption from below—the anti-colonial upsurge—as well as by pressure from above—in the form of the United States, which saw the dismantling of the empire as a key post-war objective. Accordingly, Australia faced an entirely different situation: it was no longer surrounded by empire, and it had to deal with decolonised nations to its north.

In this new environment, the White Australia policy was starting to create problems. As the historian Andrew Markus has pointed out, "the need to place diplomatic and economic links with Asian countries on a sounder footing would fail while Australia maintained what was seen to be a policy of racial arrogance towards nationals of Asian countries. The departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade were acutely aware of these problems in the 1950s." A decade on, the resolution of these problems became even more urgent and, by the mid-1960s, "the practical difficulties of maintaining the policy in the changing international climate of opinion convinced a new generation of leaders in the Liberal and Labor parties—and within the ranks of senior public servants—that major reform was inevitable. The process of change was well under way before domestic pressure groups became significant." [4]

Likewise, the racist discrimination practised against Australia's Aborigines, coupled with their appalling social conditions, were becoming something of an international embarrassment.

In 1965, following the example of the civil rights movement in the United States, "freedom rides" were conducted to highlight the extent of racial discrimination in rural New South Wales. In 1967, a strike by Aboriginal stockmen at the Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory won wide support around the country, amid a growing militancy in the working class and a rising tide of political opposition, especially among young people, to the Vietnam War.

In the same year, with the support of both major political parties, a referendum was passed by a majority of the population giving the Commonwealth government the power to legislate with regard to Aborigines. It is a measure of the extent of the legal restrictions imposed on the Aboriginal people that it was widely believed, incorrectly, that this

referendum gave them the right to vote. In fact that right had been obtained several years earlier.

In the Boyer lectures of 1968, delivered on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio, anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner drew attention to what he called "the great Australian silence". The effect of this silence was to all but completely exclude Aboriginal society—and the impact of colonial dispossession upon it—from Australian historical research. This was not an accident, Stanner insisted, or a product of personal characteristics, but had deep objective foundations.

"Inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time to something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so."

Stanner's comments were yet another example of how the "owl of wisdom" tends to fly at dusk. At the very point they were being made, the conditions that had given rise to this "structure of forgetfulness" were beginning to break-up. The exclusion of Aboriginal dispossession was essential for the cultivation of an Australian history that regarded the establishment and growth of the nation as the steady expansion of the democratic values and institutions of British society. Any historical account that openly acknowledged the violence upon which Australian society—its state, institutions and economy—had been founded, would have had significant political consequences. It would have called into question the myth of the classless society based on "mateship" and "egalitarianism". Yet this myth had occupied centre stage in the ideology of Australian nationalism, which had served the ruling classes very well for more than half a century.

By the late 1960s, the entire national story, including its "left" version—in which Australia's national identity arose out of the struggles of bush workers and the labour movement—was coming under fire. As opponents of the Vietnam War began to raise more general questions about the history of imperialist conquest, the racialist and violent origins of the Australian nation-state started to be probed. Historians embarked upon new investigations into the racially-based ideology of Laborism, as well as into the nature of the conflict between colonialism and Aboriginal society.

Geoffrey Blainey and anti-Asian racism

After 1966, the White Australia policy was progressively dismantled—first by the Holt Liberal government following the retirement of Menzies, and then by the Whitlam Labor government after it came to power in 1972. But there were no immediate political consequences. No marked change occurred in Australia's immigration program until the late 1970s, when immigrants from Asia began to arrive, particularly refugees from Indo-China. Change then proceeded relatively quickly, and with the introduction of the family reunion program, the percentage of immigrants from Asian countries increased from 16 percent in 1976 to around 30 percent by the end of the decade. By 1984 it had risen to 43 percent.

The beginning of the 1980s witnessed the most serious global recession since the 1930s, marked by the destruction of large segments of the post-war manufacturing industries in all the advanced capitalist countries. It was under these conditions that anti-Asian racism began to rear its ugly head.

In March 1984, well-known historian Geoffrey Blainey placed the issue of Asian immigration squarely on the national political agenda in a speech to the Warrnambool Rotary Club. "An increasing proportion of Australians," Blainey declared, "seem to be resentful of the large numbers of Vietnamese and other south-east Asians who are being brought in."

Blainey sought to highlight what he saw as a dramatic shift in immigration policy that had led to "Asians" becoming a "favoured majority". "As a people, we seem to move from extreme to extreme. In the past 30 years the government of Australia has moved from the extreme of wanting a white Australia to the extreme of saying that we will have an Asian Australia and that the quicker we move towards it the better.... I do not accept the view, widely held in the Federal Cabinet, that some kind of slow Asian takeover of Australia is inevitable. I do not believe that we are powerless." According to Blainey immigration levels were too high, given the levels of unemployment—at that time more than 10 percent—and poorer people in the cities were suffering the most. [5]

As criticisms of his remarks intensified, Blainey took to the airwaves and print media to defend his positions, becoming ever more strident in the process. Significantly, he sought to base his criticisms on what he saw as the lessons of history. "When I spoke at Warrnambool and earlier at the press club ... my interpretation was essentially based on my knowledge of Australian history. I was speaking very much as an historian." [6]

Blainey's arguments were grounded on the central themes of the "Australian settlement". There was, he claimed, "unease" in the community about the pace of Asian immigration, which could threaten existing institutions. "The danger to democracy, however, does not necessarily come from the Asian migrants themselves. It comes from the tensions imposed on free institutions if the community becomes too divided over cultural and racial questions. Above all, the danger to democracy comes from the fact that the new migrants, if unwanted, remain second-rate citizens with an inadequate share of freedom and opportunities." [7]

Blainey's rhetoric became even more heated in his book *All for Australia,* published later that year. In it, he employed the terminology of invasion and warfare, with "battlegrounds" in the suburbs, to describe the impact of Asian immigration. Because immigration, and especially Asian immigration, was so closely bound up with Australian history, and the attempts to create a national identity, it did not take long for the conflict to widen.

In 1985, Blainey delivered a lecture in which he denounced the "vocal, richly subsidised multicultural lobby" and spoke of the need for Australia to be "one nation" rather than "a nation of many nations". The Labor Party, he claimed, was a captive of the multicultural industry, which had "little respect for the history of Australia." There were "socialist elements" in the government, the universities, the schools and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, who were spreading the notion that Australia's history was "largely the story of violence, exploitation, repression, racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism and a few other isms." [8]

While Blainey denied he was seeking a return to White Australia, his writings were based on the same old arguments—that too great an inflow of Asian immigrants would upset national consensus and increase social tensions.

His book *All for Australia* is sometimes recalled for its imagery—the suburban "immigration" battleground, where pavements became "spotted with phlegm" and "the sky filled with greasy smoke and the smell of goat's meat"—and its allegations of a "secret room" in which numbers were manipulated to increase the Asian intake, contrary to principles announced in parliament. Its more enduring significance, however, is that it enunciated themes that were to be taken up, albeit in less strident language, by Liberal leader and eventual prime minister, John Howard.

According to Blainey, it was correct for Australia to welcome a variety of Asian migrants "but they should come on our terms, through our choosing, and in numbers with which our society can cope." He claimed that the immigration policy that was being implemented called for a "strong, long-term flow of Third World migrants" and foreshadowed "the sacrificing of vital Australian interests on behalf of vague international creeds."

Blainey reminded his readers that: "The first principle of our official *Migrant Entry Handbook* asserts: 'It is fundamental to national sovereignty that the Australian government alone should determine who will be admitted to Australia'"—an assertion that Howard was to make the theme for the Liberal's 2001 election campaign. According to Blainey, the policy of all governments since 1978 "to turn Australia into a land of all nations" ran across the "yearning for stability and social cohesion." The desire to turn Australia into a "nation of all the nations" contradicted the "increasing sense of national pride" that had become so vivid since the Whitlam era. While eschewing White Australia, Blainey cited one of its foremost nineteenth century advocates, Sir Henry Parkes, and his invocation of "the crimson thread of kinship [that] runs through us all." The "crimson thread" was "vital for any nation", Blainey insisted. But this thread was now being cut by Australian governments seeking to woo Asia, create a cult of the immigrant, emphasise separateness for ethnic groups and shun Britain. The cutting process included the "disowning of our past", along with attempts to "depict Australian history as mainly a story of exploitation, of racial violence, of oppressions and conflict". [9]

While Blainey's book has faded into obscurity, the themes are familiar. They constitute the core of what, for want of a better term, could be called the "world view" of John Howard. One is reminded, at this point, of Marx's remarks in his 1869 preface to *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* where he explained that his task was to demonstrate how the conditions of the class struggle in France "created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part." We need to use the same approach in seeking to understand the rise of Howard, now into his ninth year as prime minister.

To be continued

Notes:

1) Stuart Macintyre, *The History Wars*, p. 35

2) cited in Bain Attwood, *The Past as Future: Aborigines, Australia and the (dis)course of History,* http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1996/04/01/the-past-as-future-aborigines-australia-and-the-discourse-of-history/

3) *Historical Studies*, November 1959

4) Andrew Markus, "Reflections on a Century of Australian Immigration Control" in Laksiri Jayasuriya ed., *Legacies of White Australia*, pp. 180-182

5) cited in Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*, p. 63

6) cited in *Surrender Australia*, Markus and Ricklefs ed., Sydney 1985, p. 2

7) op cit, p. 44

8) cited in Mark McKenna, *Different Perspectives on Black Armband History* Research Paper 5, 1997-98, Parliamentary Library

9) Blainey, *All for Australia*, pp. 24, 52, 84, 153, 158-159

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