

# Australia's immigration policy



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Australia has been an immigrant society since the British established a convict colony at Sydney in 1788. There have been few periods in which there has not been a steady stream of immigrants, the longest being between 1930 and 1947 due to the world depression and the Second World War. Even then Australia agreed to receive 7 000 Jewish refugees from the Nazis at the Evian conference of 1938. The outbreak of war a year later limited the effect of this agreement. At other times of economic depression, such as the 1840s and the 1890s, immigration has been very limited but continued to some part of Australia.

Immigration policy has gone through several historic phases, each of which has influenced subsequent practice. The period of convict transportation lasted from 1788 to 1840 in New South Wales, from 1804 to 1853 in Tasmania and from 1850 to 1868 in Western Australia. This system created methods of contracting ships to transport convicts across the world on

voyages, which could last up to six months. It also created systems of rationing, accommodation and allocation to work which were to be modified for free immigrants. An example of the transfer of facilities still exists in the Macquarie Street barracks in Sydney, which were built in 1819 for convicts but then converted to house free immigrants. Another example is the use of ships, which had transported convicts to move free immigrants. Sailing ships were used into the 1870s, being replaced by steamships until the 1960s and then by air.

## Assisted immigration

The next and longest period of immigration policy began in 1831 and lasted until 1982. This was the assistance of emigrants with their fares. Australia was unique in bringing in immigrants by state action and subsidy. From the 1790s free immigrants had been allowed to settle. But most were agricultural workers, brought by rich farmers from England who had been granted land. This was the normal method in Western Australia, which was founded in 1829. But it did not work very well because it was very expensive and Western Australia did not have much good agricul-

tural land – hence the adoption of a convict system when the other Australian colonies were departing from this practice. An alternative was developed in South Australia from 1836. This was to sell off public land and use the proceeds to bring out labourers who could otherwise not afford the fares. This method was combined with one in which the Poor Law system created in 1834 could also subsidise paupers in rural areas. The whole system was supervised from London, initially by the Poor Law Commission and then by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission (1841–1870).

As the convict system was abandoned the other colonies took up the assisted passages system and modified it to suit their needs. The ultimate control rested in London and assistance was only given to British subjects – English, Irish and Scots. A few grants were given for German settlement but this was not generally approved. So that the main aim of the assisted passages system was to bring out agricultural labourers, to bring out women to remedy a serious gender imbalance, and to keep Australia British by limiting assistance to United Kingdom subjects. Those few who came from elsewhere were not prohibit-

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ed at this stage but were not an important element except for Germans in South Australia.

Assistance with fares continued for 150 years, which is unique in the history of immigration policy. One objective was to encourage immigrants to come to Australia rather than to the United States. This worked well for the English and Scots but not for the Irish, who greatly preferred America. Three major systems operated during the colonial period up until 1870, all of them supervised from London. These were: Government emigrants, who came in ships chartered by the Land and Emigration Commission; bounty immigrants, who were selected on behalf of established settlers needing labour who were paid for on arrival; and remittance immigrants who were paid for by relatives already in Australia.

After 1870 the colonial governments and then the Australian government created by federation in 1901, gained control of the system. However they still largely insisted on British subjects, except for Queensland which assisted significant numbers from Germany and Scandinavia. The colonies were also able to modify the occupations desired away from agricultural labourers and domestic servants. The largest intake of assisted immigrants during the colonial period was in Queensland in the 1880s. More immigrants arrived there than in any decade before or since. The colonies kept control of the systems until 1920 when full control passed to the Commonwealth of Australia under the 1901 constitution, where it remains. However the former colonies, now

States, kept a strong interest into the 1960s and often had additional schemes of their own.

For most of the nineteenth century anyone could enter Australia who could raise the fare. Many came out from Britain at their own expense. There was a common citizenship between Britain and Australia as a distinct Australian citizenship was not created until 1949. About half the British immigrants came with public assistance while the other half paid their own fares or were supported by employers, charities or trade unions. Most middle class occupations were not eligible for assistance. Essentially assistance involved transferring working class people from Britain to work in similar occupations in Australia. This continued to be the case right through into the 1960s. However the preferred occupations changed as the supply and demand for agricultural labourers dropped off. By the 1920s most assisted immigrants were urban workers.

### **White Australia**

While entry to Australia was relatively free the gold rushes of the 1850s to the 1890s attracted large numbers of Chinese. Pacific Island labourers were also brought in to work the growing sugar plantations of Queensland under harsh conditions – though not as slaves. At the same time large numbers of British workers were coming in and competing with the non-European immigrants. This led to a series of legislation and restrictions from the mid-1850s. The White Australia policy was developed in the 1880s and was implemented by the

new national government in 1901 through the Immigration Restriction Act. This allowed the immigration authorities to exclude anyone who was 'undesirable' and was used against non-Europeans until it was modified in the 1960s and finally abandoned in 1972. While the legislation never mentioned race it was administered in a strictly racist manner. The Pacific Islanders were returned to their homelands by 1906 and all other non-Europeans were effectively barred from entry except on a temporary basis.

Australian immigration policy after federation had three major aspects: it still favoured British immigration through the assisted passage system; it prevented non-European immigration for settlement altogether; and it discouraged but did not prohibit European migration. British immigrants who did not qualify for assistance were usually eligible to enter and settle without further restrictions. These policies led to the situation by 1945 where Australia could describe itself as "ninety-nine per cent white and ninety per cent British".

Policy began to change as a result of the fears created by the Japanese advance towards Australia from 1941. Once the war was over Australia sought to continue its policy of paying for immigrants to come in large numbers, but to be employed in public works and manufacturing rather than agriculture. The preference remained for British immigrants and they made half the total allowed in and more than half those assisted into the 1960s. However Australia, like Canada and the United States, also

took in 170 000 Displaced Persons from European camps, mainly from east European states occupied by the Soviet Red Army. This was a major departure and began the process where by Australia moved from being a 'British' to being a 'multicultural' society. Still adhering to White Australia, agreements were signed with various European governments as well as with the United Kingdom. These laid down the terms under which Europeans would be paid their passages and found employment, which included wages at trade union rates to avoid exploitation.

These agreements, which ranged from Malta and Italy in the early stages to Turkey and Yugoslavia towards the end, changed the face of most Australian cities. British predominance in the intake gradually declined, although about 80 per cent of British immigrants did receive assistance, more than for anyone else other than the Displaced Persons and other refugees.

### Post-war policy

Bringing in non-British (but still white) immigrants in large numbers presented several problems, which the state sought actively to solve. These included majority prejudice against foreigners, language difficulties, finding employment and generally integrating a range of ethnic minorities into what had been an overwhelmingly British and Irish society. At first assimilation was sought, which meant virtual disappearance of any distinct traits. This obviously failed and policy gradually shifted towards multiculturalism. Policy also shift-

ed away from racism and the White Australia policy. This finally came together in 1972 with the announcement by the new Labor government of Gough Whitlam that Australia was a multicultural society and that immigration policy would be non-discriminatory. These changes were endorsed by the more conservative Fraser government which replaced Whitlam at the end of 1975. These very major shifts were accepted on a bipartisan basis for the next few years. In the mid-1970s Australia accepted large refugee intakes from Vietnam and Lebanon, the greatest intake of non-Europeans for over a century.

### A state controlled system

Australian immigration policy has always involved a strong element of state control, not just to limit entry but also to attract and settle preferred immigrants. This control did not apply to white British subjects, including New Zealanders. Nor in the post-War period did it prevent many Europeans from coming at their own expense as well as with assistance. However, from the 1970s onwards state control was gradually extended to all immigrants and public assistance was withdrawn except for refugees. Selection eased to be on racist or even national grounds but also became stricter and was eventually extended to the British and New Zealanders. Australia became one of the few developed countries which requires a visa for all entrants, whether permanent settlers or temporary arrivals. New Zealanders, who were excluded from this requirement, are now

visaed on entry. All others must secure a visa in advance. This allows the Australian state to pick and choose precisely who it wants to admit and under what circumstances. The intake is planned in predominantly economic terms, with allowance for family reunion and refugees. Australia has had a specialist Immigration Department since 1945, which is normally represented in the Cabinet by its Minister. This Department develops and modifies the immigration programme on an annual basis, taking into account the state of the economy and likely costs involved in general.

This process of detailed planning began to some extent in 1947 but was progressively strengthened between 1979 and 1988. It has become even stricter under the conservative Howard government elected in 1996. Essentially there are three major categories for permanent settlement. These are: family reunion, 'skills', and humanitarian. Since 1966 the skilled category has replaced the family reunion as the major element. The refugee intake has remained at about 12 000 per annum for many years. Family reunion stands at about 34 000 and the skilled intake at 40 000. New Zealanders are not included as part of the planned intake and now form the largest numbers from any one country, replacing the British in 1996. The intake has shifted quite markedly in recent years towards Asia, with a major element being Chinese from the Peoples Republic, Malaysia and Singapore.

The humanitarian intake has come from Indochina, Yugoslavia and Lebanon, but also from a wide range of non-European countries.

Only 4 000 within this category are strictly refugees within the UN High Commissioner for Refugees definitions under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol.

Another recent shift has been from permanent to temporary residence. For the first time, in 2001, temporary entrants exceeded permanent. This included growing numbers of overseas students, mainly from Asia; temporary business visitors; and working youth under a series of agreements the largest of which is with the United Kingdom. Tourists are not included in this total but they too, mainly come from Asia and especially Japan. This great increase in non-Europeans as settlers, refugees and temporary visitors revived fears of other races during the 1980s. This led to the rise (and rapid collapse) of the One Nation Party in 1998 and to public debates about the meaning of multiculturalism in a more racially diverse society.

## **Current issues and problems**

By the end of the twentieth century on-quarter of Australians had been born overseas and another quarter were the children of immigrants. The great majority of these were also citizens, as naturalisation was available after residence of two years. This often led politicians to declare that Australia was "the most multicultural country in the world". This was, however, scarcely true. The 2001 Census showed that 80 per cent normally spoke English and that two-thirds gave their ancestry as Australia,

English, Scottish or Irish. About ten per cent were of non-European origin, including Aborigines. Less than two per cent were Muslims. This was certainly quite different from the ethnic makeup in 1947 but less ethnically and racially diverse than Canada or the United States. It was however, enough of a change to raise the profile of racial issues in local politics for a while.

Because Australian immigrants have usually been carefully selected they do not suffer the same levels of disadvantage or exploitation as are often found in other situations. The non-British intake between 1947 and 1972 were largely chosen for factory work but within a full employment economy and with equal access to trade union wages and conditions under the industrial arbitration system. The still constitute an important element of the working class in the major cities. But European immigration of this type has now almost ended, as has the intake from the British working class. With the ending of assisted passages in 1983 British numbers dropped rapidly to below ten per cent of the total. Moreover those coming were much more likely to be from the professional and managerial classes as they were often paid for by their employers. The main entrants to manual work in recent years have been from the humanitarian and family reunion streams. But they have been coming into an economy with a consistent level of over six per cent unemployment. This level is greatly exceeded, for example, among Vietnamese and Lebanese. This creates a disadvantaged minority with corresponding settlement problems.

Because Australian governments have accepted the need to provide settlement assistance such as English teaching, there are few large pockets of serious disadvantage comparable to those suffered by the small Aboriginal minority. But a rundown of manufacturing has certainly had an impact on less skilled non-English-speaking immigrants and their children. Official policy, by shifting towards a skilled intake, has tried to avoid these problems. This has meant that Asians, other than refugees, are generally better educated and have higher incomes than the national average. This is particularly true for those from countries such as India, Singapore, Malaysia or Sri Lanka, which have inherited English-language education systems. The fear that non-Europeans would lower standards, which was strong in the past, is simply unfounded.

The recent crisis over asylum seekers has shown up some of the continuing problems in managing a strict and rigid intake system, which aims to maximise skilled intakes. Fear of boat people coming down from Asia has been an undercurrent in popular Australian thinking for a century. Reacting to this those attempting to seek asylum in Australia by this method have been treated with great severity since 1991. They have been subject to mandatory and irrevocable internment in remote desert camps, run by private prison companies since 1997. A further refinement came in 2001 with the "pacific solution". This involved sending asylum seekers rescued at sea to the independent states of Papua New Guinea and Nauru, where many still re-

main. Australia thus avoided its obligations under the UN Convention and has taken only some those found to be refugees within that Convention, with New Zealand taking many others. Almost all those concerned were from Iraq or Afghanistan, in both of which countries Australian troops have been involved in the overthrow of the governments from which the asylum seekers were fleeing.

The 'burden' of asylum seekers coming towards Australia by boat has been quite small. The United Kingdom, with three times the population, has taken in more than twenty times as many in recent

years. The Australian government has, however, taken advantage of the distant asylum seeker crises in Europe to make it almost impossible to use this avenue of escape. Australia's long tradition of taking in refugees, extending back at least to the Evian agreement of 1938, have been seriously restricted. While highly controversial, Australian policy has been endorsed at the 2001 election. It was shown that deliberate manipulation of public fears was electorally productive. While the One Nation party disintegrated, the conservative majority took over some of its policies and appeals.

The strength of the Australian immigration policy has always been that isolation made it possible to determine who would settle. This is still the case despite the greater ease of travel. Economic imperatives have recently tended to submerge humanitarian considerations. Australia has been free from most of the social and economic problems associated with mass migration elsewhere. But this is often due to deliberate exclusion or discouragement of those who most need to seek a new life in a very prosperous and thinly inhabited society.



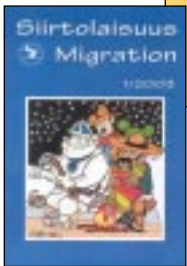
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