

# LEGACIES OF WHITE AUSTRALIA

**RACE, CULTURE and NATION**

Edited by LAKSIRI JAYASURIYA,  
DAVID WALKER and JAN GOTHARD



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More than one hundred years after it first appeared in the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 and thirty years after it was reportedly put to rest, the so-called White Australia policy continues to haunt the Australian political landscape. In the new millennium the *Tampa* incident and controversy surrounding asylum seekers have fuelled renewed speculation about the enduring legacies of White Australia. In this volume, leading Australian scholars critically re-examine these legacies to provide a foundational contribution to an informed debate on the essential issues of race, identity and nation that will determine our attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism and Australian–Asian engagement in the twenty-first century.

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LAKSIRI JAYASURIYA,  
DAVID WALKER and JAN GOTHARD  
Foreword by  
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## CHAPTER 11

*Fin de Siècle Musings*

Laksiri Jayasuriya

This volume of essays arose from a two day Symposium in December 2001 reflecting on a significant historical event, the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*. As one of the convenors of that gathering, in these final musings I wish to make a few comments and observations on the theme of the Symposium as it has been represented in this book. The idea of holding a symposium arose for several reasons—foremost being my reaction to the relative neglect of this historic event amidst the triumphalism of many other Centenary of Federation celebrations. Another source of inspiration was reading David Walker's *Anxious Nation*—an insightful and perceptive work.<sup>1</sup> This, among other writings, reminded me of how ignorant many are of the history of this country—true equally of old and new settlers. As the German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder rightly observed recently, 'without knowledge of the past there is no way to a future'. It is, perhaps, more important for those of us who are newcomers to this land to make a special effort to gain a good understanding of its history. Without this knowledge one runs the risk of being seduced by single narratives and reflective renderings of history.

I was also influenced by the fact I am a part of the legacy of White Australia. I came to Australia as a private student to the University of Sydney in 1951. This was mainly due to the late Professor A. P. Elkin,

the distinguished Australian anthropologist who was one of the earliest critics of the White Australia policy.<sup>2</sup> In 1954 I was appointed to an academic position as a Teaching Fellow in Psychology at the University of Sydney, probably one of the earliest appointments of an Asian to a university position in Australia. In fact, in order to enable me to accept this position, my passport needed to be specially endorsed by the late Harold Holt. Hence, I have much to reflect on; and more so because I have also had the privilege of playing a role in the public affairs of this country. In 1973 I was invited to serve on the Immigration Advisory Council (IAC), an august body of the establishment. Along with four other migrant settlers, I was probably the 'token Asian'.<sup>3</sup>

As we come to grips with the past, we begin to see that there are as many Australias as there are narrators. For example, as Hilary Carey mentioned, Alfred Deakin, a leading spokesman for the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, was fascinated by India and oriental mysticism.<sup>4</sup> Deakin wrote two books on the Indian subcontinent and his *Temple and Tomb in India* devotes three chapters to a highly sympathetic account of Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> Deakin seemed to have led two very different lives: Victorian politician by day and 'esoteric Buddhist' by night.<sup>6</sup> His mysticism and Buddhist sympathies however, did not inform his politics, although he was, in a curiously matter of fact way, complimentary to Asians in that he argued that it was the 'high abilities and good qualities of these alien races which makes them dangerous to us'.<sup>7</sup> Many influential figures today think likewise; who knows, they may be reincarnations of Deakin!

Looked at from the vantage point of historical reflection, the legacies of White Australia provide us with 'complementary and competing discourses',<sup>8</sup> some of which are even contradictory and baffling. This should help us to be more circumspect and cautious in the judgements we may make about this historical past. As has been commented upon in several chapters in this collection, we have inherited or come to witness many competing, conflicting, and even contradictory messages or discourses. But one may still ask: what is the relevance of White Australia to the many contemporary political issues ranging from refugees to reconciliation?



It would be simplistic and erroneous to regard recent events as a resurrection of earlier thinking about a white Australia of one hundred years ago. For one thing, demographic changes over the last four to five decades have radically transformed the social, political, and economic texture of Australia as a nation. Why then is White Australia still significant today in helping us to understand some of our most pressing contemporary social and political burdens and liabilities? Part of the answer lies in the way in which the ideology of White Australia continues to infuse how we think of citizenship or the idea of civic nationhood—no longer in terms of racial homogeneity but more in terms of a cultural oneness, a civic ideal infused with core cultural values.

Rogers Smith's work on this same issue in the context of the United States is especially perceptive and relevant. He speaks of the 'politics of people building' and points to what he regards as the 'constitutive stories' that determine the meaning given to prevailing conceptions of citizenship: the civic myths which have such a powerful impact on politics.<sup>9</sup> What White Australia provided was a set of myths, which combined race, nation and culture in a way that reinforced a conception of exclusionary citizenship. It is this underlying dominant *leitmotif* of exclusion<sup>10</sup> underpinning the many legacies of White Australia, on which this collection reflects.

Two of these legacies are closely linked—Australia's relationship with the Asian region and the impact of that relationship on a sense of Australian identity.<sup>11</sup> I believe these will continue to dominate the social and political agenda in the foreseeable future. The critical issue is the dilemma that Australia faces as an independent sovereign nation, eager to carve out her distinctive identity as a nation within the region in which she is located, the Asia-Pacific region. This dilemma is of course in part a consequence of the celebrated tension between our history and geography. Bruce Grant has captured this geopolitical dilemma vividly by portraying Australia as a white, Christian, European nation:

...stuck like an anchored raft between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, an island and a continent, detached from the great land

mass of ideas in the northern hemisphere and set apart from the great American western hemisphere; sufficient of a place itself, calm and vaguely hospitable, to make one wonder about it.<sup>12</sup>

Given that the core of Australian policies towards Asia—governed by the 'emotional dependence on the Europeans and the Americans'—was 'determined by the White Australia policy',<sup>13</sup> the way in which we grapple with this dilemma is also critical for how we relate to our immediate neighbours through 'Asian Engagement'. The relevance of White Australia lies in the constitutive stories of peoplehood that have always been founded on some kind of engagement, hostile and/or collaborative, with an imaginary Asia. In this sense, 'Asian Engagement' will continue to be the foil on which an Australian identity is founded, and on which it may even flounder. I do not have a magic solution to this dilemma except to say that it is a futile task to search in vain, as some are doing to this day, for old moorings, a romantic past decaying beyond recognition.

What alternatives do we have? Are we an 'Asian nation'? Can we shed the solid intellectual, political, social and economic links we have with a past, all of which is steeped in the western, intellectual, Judaeo-Christian tradition and political liberalism? On the question of Australia's Asian-centredness<sup>14</sup> or 'Asian Engagement', we need to bear in mind that Asia is not by any means monolithic. We discover 'Asia' as David Walker has observed, in a variety of ways; and no-one has exclusive rights to having 'discovered Asia' as a key element of public policy.<sup>15</sup> Asia is a vast and diverse continent governed by different social and cultural traditions. In the wise words of an eminent Australian scholar and political scientist of the 1950s, the late Professor William Macmahon Ball, 'Australia's future lay not just *in* Asia but *with* Asia'.<sup>16</sup> He went on to add that we have to learn to work *with* and *through*, not against, Asia's striving for independence and a place in the world community.<sup>17</sup>

In considering the crisis of Australian identity, we need to be reminded that what propelled much of White Australia a hundred years ago was the desire to maintain a British identity alongside a firm commitment to sustain and strengthen the British character and British

institutions.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, racial and cultural homogeneity became an article of faith in nation building or 'people building', as the indispensable condition of national unity and social cohesion. 'One People, One Nation' became an article of faith. Admittedly, over the past few decades, British identity has given rise to a new sense of Australian identity, but one which is still anchored to a past which has long since disappeared. Thus, among those who are strident in a demand for One Australia or a united, cohesive, Australia, one detects a new language of discourse steeped in xenophobic nationalism which relives the orthodoxy of the need to preserve British Australian nationality, reminiscent of Henry Parkes' famous slogan, 'One People, One Destiny'.<sup>19</sup>

Put simply, the denial of difference that characterises this new nationalism exposes the paradox of cultural pluralism—that the celebration of culture confronts the structural reality of the very difference it seeks to deny through its strong adherence to a politics of universalism. This has been the Achilles heel of Australian multiculturalism. The distinction between 'them' and 'us'—those who belong and those who do not belong to the nation—is in many ways a consequence of an identity politics which celebrates and glorifies cultural diversity while denying the recognition of 'difference' in the public domain.

Let me give you a graphic illustration of what I mean by quoting from a letter I received recently from Bart Srhoy, a West Australian who came as an immigrant from Croatia in 1938.<sup>20</sup> In this letter, he recounts his personal experiences as an Australian citizen:

I came to Australia in 1938 and ever since, eagerly wanted to become an equal Australian,—but somehow and somewhat I always felt left out. Deep inside I felt I did not belong in this country...[my accent was not] classed as equal to accents from British and Irish isles...Yes, I failed! I have made a success in the business world only thanks to my effort and perhaps natural skill.

Thousands of immigrants came to this Country to slave as laborers, died or grew old without ever becoming Australians, irrespective of attaining their rights and citizenship.

This poignant letter clearly demonstrates that the 'identity politics' characteristic of Australian multiculturalism of the last few decades has failed to create an inclusive society. An exclusionary notion of citizenship, contrary to the official rhetoric, has been an implicit element of the state-sponsored 'cultural multiculturalism', which seeks to celebrate cultural difference. The expectation was that in the long term, second or third generation offspring of migrants would be good Australians embodying core cultural values. But the ideology of multiculturalism has now entered a new phase and become the subject of derisive comments from critics drawn from the left and right of the political spectrum, in particular the new nationalists who fear the so-called 'cultural divide'. The result has been the rampant xenophobic nationalism or 'xeno-racism' of the present day.<sup>21</sup>

For these critics of multiculturalism, a sense of Australian identity, an authentic nationalism and a sense of belonging to the nation can only come from acquiring the values of the *cultural* nation—the core cultural values.<sup>22</sup> Stated differently, the 'constitutive story of Australians as European descended men' has long been implicit in the 'people-building' exercise of Australia.<sup>23</sup>

The dominant paradigm of the 'identity politics' of 'cultural multiculturalism' is often overtaken by the politics of universalism, which reveals a hidden agenda. This is, in brief, the desire to create an image of a united Australia, secure and socially cohesive, with the implicit assumption that the enjoyment of the rights of citizenship and the right to express one's cultural identity is conditional on the acceptance of the mythical core cultural values implicit in John Howard's failed Constitutional Preamble.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the recent version of Australian multiculturalism—and the only form acceptable to John Howard as being durable and justifiable—is one which enshrines a sense of identity and belonging as a cultural nation—that is, a nation as constituted by common core cultural values. This version reinforces the constitutive story of Australia derived from the past, conflating race, nation and culture.<sup>25</sup> What this does is to make the *political* nation synonymous with the *cultural* nation.

As we celebrate the centenary of Federation and revisit the legacies of the White Australia policy, it is time we did away once

and for all with the dream of an 'unmixed nation' and come to terms with the rampant pluralism of contemporary Australian society. In confronting honestly and realistically the dynamics of a pluralistic society exposed uneasily to the new global economy, we need to rethink the rationale of Australian multiculturalism to create a version that can strengthen social bonds and identifications that have been severely fractured by the withdrawal of social rights.

Ironically, the clue to a new way of thinking about how we may 'constitute a people' may well come from our past. As Galligan and Chesterman argue, 'citizenship was at the heart of Australian politics', and 'one of the great purposes and achievements of Federation in 1901 was the establishment of an Australian citizenship'.<sup>26</sup> Although citizenship, as Kim Rubenstein reminds us in this volume, was never spelt out in the Constitution, it remained an integral feature, so that Alfred Deakin was able to greet his fellow countrymen as 'citizens of the new born Commonwealth'.<sup>27</sup>

By reformulating the concept of citizenship—which has always been implicit in the discourses of Australia's 'liberal multiculturalism'<sup>28</sup>—we may be able to extend its meaning as a normative concept to include 'difference' and incorporate the pluralism of society.<sup>29</sup> In brief, we need to move towards a 'differentiated citizenship'<sup>30</sup> that extends and enhances the conventional liberal individualist model by redefining the understanding of the political community to include 'difference'.

What political liberalism acknowledges in citizenship theory is the 'central importance of the political community with a shared political morality'.<sup>31</sup> If the citizenship ideal remains the road we need to traverse to meet the challenges arising from the legacies of White Australia in an Australia no longer peopled only by 'European descended men', then we need to pose the critical question put by Professor Deryck Schreuder, Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Australia, in his Opening Address to the Symposium which gave birth to this collection: How does one constitute a plural society?<sup>32</sup> In other words, how does a liberal political system committed to principles of universalism accommodate difference? According to Taylor, this is primarily a

question of how we determine and treat all citizens as being equal while at the same time recognising their separate identities.<sup>33</sup>

There are precedents in history, for example, the contemporary European Union, in which a sense of identity, belonging and nationalism arises from the sovereignty of the people, and membership of a political community where nationalism is equated with the shared values—equality and freedom—of a *political* culture. Or, as some have expressed it, the idea of a nation as a community may be based on political equality and democracy, creating a sense of 'civic nationalism'.<sup>34</sup> But importantly, this requires, as I have argued, that we distinguish the *political* nation from the *cultural* nation.<sup>35</sup>

As the late Eugene Kamenka observed, quoting Ernst Renan, the nation rests on the 'daily plebiscite on the will and ability to live together in a largely shared political culture'.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore the *civic culture* and its public virtues such as the equality of respect, respect for liberty and freedom and the rule of law—which together constitute the liberal democratic inheritance and provide substance for our sense of unity and nationhood. In short, it is the civic virtues of the political culture, not the core cultural values of the unmixed nation, which provide the cement that binds us together.<sup>37</sup>

The old political culture, as Dr Geoff Gallop, Premier of Western Australia, observed in his address to the Symposium, is made of worn out elements such as *terra nullius*, assimilationism, fear of Asia, and of course, the White Australia policy.<sup>38</sup> Many of these elements, though obsolete, still linger in the political psyche of the nation and make the prevailing political culture irrelevant to current social and political realities such as globalisation and the increased diversity and pluralism of Australian society. We need, therefore, to forge and promote a new political culture to give reality and substance to our cultural realities and in particular, to reinstate the notion of 'we the people', missing in the Constitutional document handed down from over a hundred years. As Habermas expresses it:

...the political culture must serve as the common denominator for a constitutional patriotism which simultaneously sharpens an



awareness of the multiplicity and integrity of the different forms of life which exist in the multicultural society.<sup>39</sup>

This constitutional task would indeed have the endorsement of none other than Alfred Deakin, who foresaw the prospect that 'the Constitution would evolve and "unfold with the unfoldment" of the nation's characteristics'.<sup>40</sup> In this context, Bob Hawke too, in rejecting a minimalist view of the Republican debate, makes a plea for constitutional reform on the grounds that we cannot be 'bound by a document framed by the founding fathers a hundred years ago'.<sup>41</sup>

The ideas generated by the Symposium and recorded in this book may help us to give political legitimacy to a revitalised sense of Australian citizenship, a pluralistic concept of citizenship as the basis of a new paradigm for Australian multiculturalism. To this end, we need to inscribe this citizenship ideal within a statutory Bill of Rights or Charter of Rights that may eventually be incorporated into a constitutional document.<sup>42</sup> This will, among other things, enable us to locate a sense of Australian identity, of being an Australian, in terms of one's membership in the political community. What we need to strive for is the development of a new political architecture, a range of new and different social forms, images and styles of conduct befitting the 'people' of the twenty-first century. The challenge is to determine what political forms are best suited to a 'condition of citizenship' marked by substantial diversity,<sup>43</sup> without losing sight of the ultimate objective that 'politics must create unity without denying or repressing multiplicity'.<sup>44</sup>

## Chronology

Events related to immigration and bearing on the White Australia policy

From c.40,000–60,000 BP Aboriginal people lived in Australia.

- 1606 First Dutch contact at Cape York Peninsula.
- 1642 Tasman claims 'Van Diemen's Land' for the Netherlands.
- 1770 James Cook lands at Botany Bay and claims east coast for Britain on the basis of *terra nullius*.
- 1783 James Maria Matra and Sir Joseph Banks argue that Chinese migrants would be crucial to any British colonisation of Australia.
- 1787 British colony of New South Wales established by law.
- 1788 Convict First Fleet lands under Governor Phillip.
- 1790 Colony of New South Wales saved by the mercy mission of the *Supply* to Java.
- 1791 First convict ship arrives direct from Ireland.  
First convicts escape captivity and set out to walk to China.