

BEFORE THE REFUGEES: FOREIGN IMMIGRATION POLICY AND AUSTRALIA IN THE 1920s

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Historical literature dealing with Australian refugee policy during and after the Third Reich is now vast. Scholars such as Michael Blakeney, W.D. Rubinstein, Hilary L. Rubinstein, Suzanne D. Rutland and Paul R. Bartrop, among others, have examined the formation and execution of the government's stance on Jewish refugee migration from a number of perspectives, and the collected fruits of their endeavours cover many volumes of solid academic research.¹ At no time, however, has any detailed treatment been undertaken exploring the bureaucratic environment in which the refugees found themselves.² It has generally been assumed that the refugees faced a restrictionist government either because they were Jewish or because they were foreign, but to date the broader context of Australian immigration in the years leading up to 1933 has not been considered. It is as if an official position on Jewish migration simply materialised with the onset of the refugees.

The Australian government had to improvise a policy as the vast number of refugees from Nazi Germany became an issue. If it is true that policy is a response to a challenge, then the Australians found themselves responding to the challenge of this unforeseen refugee 'problem' through a somewhat negative policy of restriction and niggardliness. This has already been covered in other works, descriptions of that policy are superfluous here. What *does* need to be examined, however, is the milieu from which this policy emerged — not specifically regarding refugee Jews, but foreign immigrants generally. An understanding of how Australian governments and the Australian people viewed such migrants might then shed light on why Jews from Germany were from the first identified as undesirable additions to the Australian population.

The immediate aftermath of the Great War set the tone for the kind of priorities the Australians would demonstrate throughout the interwar years. While anyone who was British could simply walk into the country and begin an Australian life unimpeded, foreign (or 'alien') immigrants had all manner of restrictive or exclusionary regulations placed over their entry. Jews, while not singled out specifically, were nonetheless subjected to the same immigration laws as anyone else — which for much of the 1920s counted against any sort of large (or even medium) scale foreign immigration.

Soon after the end of the Great War, a measure was introduced into the *Immigration Act 1901* which prohibited the entry of 'any person who ... is of German, Austro-German, Bulgarian or Hungarian parentage and nationality, or is a Turk of Ottoman race.'³ The ban was to last for a period of five years from 2 December 1920, and thereafter until the Governor-General would

otherwise determine.⁴ There was a good deal of discussion over the regulation as it was going through Parliament, with Mr West (East Sydney, NSW) referring to the Bill as 'panic legislation.'⁵ W.J. Williams (Franklin, Tasmania) informed the House that if he had to choose between Germans as immigrants and 'some of those who were our Allies in the last War, I would take the Germans.' He made this statement, he said, 'even at the risk of being misunderstood.'⁶ In some quarters, the restriction of *all* immigrants, and not just former enemies, was welcome. Dr Earle Page, the leader of the recently-formed Country Party, stated that he believed in a policy of 'Australia for the Australians', by which he meant 'Australia for all the people who are living here now, and for all those of the right kind who are willing to come and try to help make this nation self-contained.'⁷ At the same time (perhaps to the contrary), he was firmly of the opinion that 'we need a greater population', and saw that the 'inevitable result of a selfish and parochial policy would be, instead of 'Australia for the Australians', 'Australia for some other nation'.

It is significant to note that as Deputy Prime Minister in the coalition government of Stanley Melbourne Bruce two years later Page would find that many in Cabinet agreed with him. By 1922 the Commonwealth was receiving immigration applications from Europe in increasing numbers, and Percy Deane, the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, observed that it may have to become Commonwealth policy to encourage some European nationalities and refuse encouragement to others.⁸ Yet the government did not consider refusing potential immigrants who were of good character and in sound health. The Minister for Home and Territories, with responsibility for immigration matters, was of the opinion that:

it would be unwise in the interests of the Commonwealth as a whole and in view of the desirableness [*sic*] of encouraging the settlement of Australia by people of white races in furtherance of the White Australia Policy, to place any undue restrictions on the admission of white friendly aliens.⁹

The lack of restriction over the entry of aliens was not intended to act as an encouragement to non-British European immigration. There was no suggestion that Europeans would be allowed to come to Australia in unlimited numbers. The government's policy was simply that if Europeans wished to come to Australia and could finance themselves, there would be no unacceptable obstacles placed in their way.

In 1921 the United States introduced rigid quotas over immigration based on the principle of the national origin of immigrant groups, and it was felt in Australia that the primary effect of this would be for Europeans to look at the Commonwealth as the next most likely area for emigration. Despite this, the government decided at an early date that it would not follow the United States in introducing an immigration policy based on quotas. In April 1923, Sir George Pearce, the Minister for Home and Territories, held to the opinion that 'it is not necessary or desirable at present to fix quotas' for any nationality of friendly European aliens.¹⁰ It was felt that the successful encouragement of hundreds of thousands of British migrants, which Bruce had as an ultimate aim for Australia's postwar development, would be sufficient to 'guard against the

possibility of any diminution of the present proportion of British to alien residents in Australia.¹¹ At this time the largest single non-British immigrant group was comprised of Italians, and even that was declining owing to a passport agreement made with the Italian government. This limited the number of passports granted to intending emigrants, so that only people nominated by Australian residents prepared to guarantee their welfare on arrival would be permitted to leave the country.

Rejection of a general quota for alien immigrants was at this time most clearly summed up by the Secretary of the Department of Home and Territories:

It would not be expedient to fix quotas and impose special conditions of admission in respect of one or two white friendly alien countries, without making such rules apply generally. This would involve an undesirable discrimination as between the nationals of the various friendly countries, and, in any case, would throw a great deal of unnecessary work and responsibility upon British Passport Officers in connection with the observance of the quotas.¹²

Besides these practical considerations, it was also to be borne in mind that 'an increase of white population is recognised as being one of Australia's greatest needs, and the alien population already here constitutes less than one per cent of the whole.'¹³ The shocks of the Great War had paradoxically brought home to the Australians the need for a large population; that this might be built through foreign immigration, though, given an Australian tradition of opposition to all things alien, was indeed highly ironic. British migrants, of course, were not seen as aliens for migration purposes.

The government offered a further justification for its liberal policy: the possible international repercussions to Australia if it was not seen as generous. In a letter to Prime Minister Bruce from the Premier of South Australia, John Gunn, the view was expressed that:

there would be serious objections from an international standpoint against placing restrictions on the landing in Australia of immigrants from friendly European countries, if such immigrants are in sound health and otherwise eligible for admission. This would especially be the case if discrimination were made against certain races.¹⁴

Bruce, a man of liberal spirit, desirous of his place in the history of world statesmanship, employed this argument on numerous occasions through the 1920s. The year 1925 would, however, see a reversal in the existing policy. Immigrants had by this stage been coming from Europe in such numbers that the pressure of public opinion forced Bruce to adopt a compromise position over quotas.

Attitudes to non-British immigrants did not, of course, change overnight, but the process did intensify with the larger numbers allowed by Bruce's policy. Even as early as 1922 concern was being expressed over the possibility that the future might see the Italian population of North Queensland demanding the teaching of their language in State schools. The books that were procured for such purposes were held to be of dubious content, and literature from Australia was seen as far preferable to 'the nasty sex stuff we import from abroad.'¹⁵ The Queensland Premier, E.G. Theodore, had no negative comments to offer at this time, though he felt it preferable to see British Australians

settling the land instead of Italians — especially while Australians were drawing government rations and Italians were proving successful as farmers.¹⁶

This theme was taken up by the populist newspaper *Smith's Weekly* two years later, when, in an article entitled 'DAGOES POUR INTO SOUTH AUSTRALIA/ITALIAN AND MALTESE INVASION', attention was drawn to the 'dago toilers [who] work harder, longer and more uncomplainingly than white [*sic*], and accept the isolation and barrenness of existence in ... desert mining camps without protest.' The 'Mediterranean scum', as *Smith's* called them, were accustomed to 'breadline wages in their own countries'; because of this, they were prepared to work for 'a little above the breadline' in Australia, which meant, in reality, 'a bit below what the white man gets.'¹⁷

In the Federal Parliament, too, concerns were expressed over the general difference in living standards. Senator Edward Needham (Labor, WA) informed the Senate that many European migrants 'come from countries where the social conditions are vastly different' from those in Australia. He observed how they form 'little communities of their own', and how they have 'nothing in common with the ideals, social or otherwise, of the people of the Commonwealth.' Their standard of living, overall, 'is much lower than that to which we are accustomed.' 'Most of those in our midst', he stated, 'are willing to accept social conditions that Australians will not tolerate.'¹⁸

The likelihood of racial deterioration was another continuing theme among those opposed to a foreign presence. In 1925 the Australian Labor Party newspaper *Labor Call* queried whether anyone could doubt 'that Australia is destined to become a great nation inhabited by superior people', though it registered concern that there were those who 'preach contempt for our desire to keep this country for posterity.'¹⁹ In an interview with Prime Minister Bruce in 1927, a delegation from the Australian Natives' Association presented the view that they 'very strongly wished to see the racial purity of Australia maintained' — not from a feeling of superiority, simply 'from the point of view of what was most advantageous to the country.'²⁰ The possibility that Australia would become a 'polyglot' nation like the USA was also of concern. Sir Elliot Johnson, the Nationalist Member for Lang (NSW), stated that he 'could not forget the lesson learned from the experience of the countries of North America.' When he contemplated the races which 'largely form the population of these countries', he said, 'I am not at all enamoured of the prospect of large numbers of Southern Europeans being brought here to assist to populate and develop Australia.'²¹

The weight of public prejudice was such that some form of regulation obviously had to be established over the entry of people from specific nations, and the government consequently decided to request the British Consuls in Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania to limit the issue of British visas to Australia to one hundred per month from nationals from each of these countries. (Not many were coming anyway; but the government felt it had to contain their *potential* to do so.) In notifying the respective Balkan countries of this decision, the Australian government refrained from giving reasons of race or nationality as the major idea behind the imposition of the quota. They were advised of the

'restricted possibilities for employment in Australia of persons unable to speak English', and that it was in the best interests of intending migrants that they not be 'stranded on arrival' in Australia.²²

Not all European groups could have been excluded in this way, however. The Maltese, for example, could not be placed under a quota, on account of the fact that they were British and European — though the Federal government desired that some restriction should be placed over their entry, too. Accordingly, an arrangement had been negotiated earlier with the government of Malta that passports be regulated in such a way that not more than twenty Maltese could land in any one State of the Commonwealth in a single month.²³ From an earlier regulation, Soviet nationals required special permission to enter Australia because immigrants had to be in possession of a passport 'issued by a Government recognised by the Government of the United Kingdom.'²⁴ As the British Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald had recognised the Soviet Union in early 1924, however, this was no longer applicable. A new way of preventing large numbers of Russian refugees and other immigrants from coming to Australia had therefore to be found, and Sir George Pearce did so by requesting British Consuls to inform all Russians applying for passports 'that it would be inadvisable to proceed to Australia unless the immigrants were familiar with the English language.'²⁵

While this measure would discriminate against Jews from the USSR seeking to enter Australia, there is no evidence to suggest that at this time the Commonwealth authorities had Jews in mind as a specific group needing restrictive treatment. The Australians were aware that Jews occupied important places in the Soviet hierarchy, but saw the threat of communism as more of a threat than that of a large ingress of Jews from Russia. This needs to be explained.

The fear of a communist incursion into Australia was profound in the 1920s, and the threat of Bolshevism was frequently pointed to as a justification for curtailing foreign migration. As early as 1919 the middle class ladies' journal *Table Talk* warned how 'Bolshevists come into free lands from countries where there is little or no liberty', where 'oppression is an actuality', and where they 'endeavour to spread Bolshevism and to introduce the Soviet plan where neither is needed nor desired.'²⁶ The Director of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch of the Attorney-General's Department, Colonel Harold Jones, established a link between the Industrial Workers of the World, the Communist Party, and strikes and dissatisfaction on the North Queensland sugar-cane fields in 1922, and noted that there were 'a great number of aliens in the sugar areas, comprising Italians, Greeks, Spaniards, French, Austrians, Germans, Russians and Maltese.'²⁷ A grave and genuine concern ran through many Australians with the publication of a report in 1923 that the Federal government was considering allowing six thousand refugees from Russia entry to the Commonwealth.²⁸ Officials were quick to deny such a scheme was being contemplated, the Acting Prime Minister declaring that 'this Government would not permit the entry of such persons' under any circumstances.²⁹ The fear of allowing a saboteur, *agent-provocateur* or 'Bolshevist' into the country was

simply too great to allow people in from Russia. The Department of External Affairs drew the government's attention to the reality of the situation in a report entitled *Communism in the Soviet Union (Russia)* in 1925:

The watch-word of the Third International is 'World Revolution.' To achieve this purpose it has adopted tactics described as 'boring from within.' Through its agencies, emissaries, and affiliated organisations it conducts propaganda by the distribution of communist literature; it foments industrial troubles; it fans movements of political revolt in colonies and dependencies. In countries where trade unionism has developed it has recently adopted a policy securing control of the trade unions through small nuclei of converts in each union.³⁰

On these grounds alone Russians would have been rejected, irrespective of whether or not anti-foreign antipathies existed. Thus, while quotas of different kinds were being introduced through the 1920s, the position of prospective Russian immigrants did not alter: it remained as it had been since the end of the Great War, and they were not permitted entry.

Italians were not subject to a quota or other restriction, on account of the arrangement made with the Italian government in 1923. The hope was that this would be self-regulatory. As if to double-indemnify itself, however, the government instituted a new regulation from 1 April 1925 under which alien immigrants would henceforth require the sum of 35 pounds on arrival as a guarantee that they would not automatically become a charge upon the State.³¹ The principle of 'landing money' thus became established, and it — together with an accompanying landing permit issued by the department — was to form the basis of Australia's future policy of immigration management. Landing money was to prove a stumbling block to many intending migrants, and the monthly quotas for Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania remained unfilled for most of 1925.³²

By the end of 1925, five years had elapsed since the ban on ex-enemy aliens had been imposed, and in lifting the embargo Prime Minister Bruce wrote that as from 2 December 'the same restrictions based on economic considerations [would] apply to ex enemy Europeans as to other Europeans.'³³ Pearce minuted to his departmental Secretary that 'No quota will be fixed' on German and Austrian immigrants.³⁴ The only requirement would be that they be in possession of 40 pounds landing money and satisfy the usual health and character standards. At no stage was any reference made (much less even suggested) that the new arrangements would not apply to Jewish Germans or Jewish Austrians; all applications would be dealt with equally.

Apart from the ex-enemy aliens, the government's general policy towards foreign migration had undergone an about-face since the early years of the decade. From no restrictions, there were now restrictions; from no quotas, there were now quotas; from no discrimination as to national origin, there was now active discrimination. This to one side, Bruce defended his earlier policy at every opportunity. In an important statement to Parliament in 1927 he went to some length to explain that no harm had been done to Australia by the influx of the previous few years. Referring to the oft-quoted figure of ninety-eight per cent of the Australian population being of British stock, he stated

that, logically, ninety-eight per cent of the births in Australia were of British parentage. The upshot of this was that 'we are maintaining satisfactorily the proportion of those of British strain in Australia to-day.' The figures proved, he said, 'that at present there is no menace to our racial purity', and that the current statistics could not label the Commonwealth as doing anything to antagonise the other countries of the world.³⁵

The fact that there was no actual quota placed on Italian migrants, however, was still a cause for concern. A ninety-eight per cent British Australia could not be maintained if Italian migration remained unchecked for too long. The ten months ending 31 October 1927 realised an Italian inflow of 7,677, as compared with 5,256 and 3,197 for the same periods in 1925 and 1926.³⁶ Together with the quotas allowed for the other southern European countries, it was clear that the Italian figure needed to be reduced, even if the overall position was not yet alarming. Consequently, Bruce made personal representations to the Italian government for arrangements that 'not more than 3,000 Italians should come into Australia' in the year 1928, at the rate of 'not more than 250 per month.'³⁷ Bruce informed the Italian Consul-General that consideration would be given to cases of family reunion after three thousand had been reached. The Consul-General stated that the Italian government would be satisfied with this arrangement. He could hardly have said otherwise. Fascist Italy was seeking to build up its population, and in view of its policies closing down emigration the Australian quota figure was to prove unnecessary. Net migration from Italy to Australia for the two years 1928 and 1929 would only total 1,420.³⁸

In view of the worsening state of the economy, the Australian government also decided to reduce the quotas established in 1925 for the other southern European countries. Figures for nationals of Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania were halved to fifty per month for the year 1928, and restrictions over the entry of Poles, Czechoslovaks and Estonians were also established. The quota from these countries was to be no more than twenty-five per month.³⁹

The following year, all quotas were revised. The Albanian quota was halved to three hundred per annum; Greeks were reduced to 347; Yugoslavs to 428; Czechoslovaks to 273; and Poles to 267. The Estonian quota remained at three hundred.⁴⁰ In 1930, the quotas were again reduced: Greeks and Yugoslavs were to be allowed into Australia to the total of three hundred each, while Czechoslovaks, Poles, Estonians and Albanians were allowed entry to the total of one hundred and fifty. Bulgarians became subject to a quota for the first time, also having to comply with the latter figure.⁴¹

By this stage, the second major catastrophe of the twentieth century had befallen Australia in the form of a crippling economic depression. Before the end of 1931 perhaps a third of the workforce was without work, and the ruling Federal Labor Party was in ruins. The possibility of civil violence was raised, with a fascist-style paramilitary group, the New Guard, attracting adherents throughout the land. Widespread suffering occurred in all parts of the nation, as the unemployed attempted to cope with no work, little in the way of government assistance, mass evictions, no ready cash, and a business sector which did not have the confidence to expand. Added to this, the Depression

had closed down immigration on economic grounds. The Labor government of J.H. Scullin, which had won power in October 1929, could hardly be expected to favour immigration at a time of high unemployment and economic instability. In 1930, the first constraints on assisted migration from Britain were instituted. By 1931, severe restrictions over all immigration had been imposed. The policy Australia was going to take into the 1930s was now fully dependent upon the landing permit system, with the granting of permits confined to an extremely narrow circle: only close dependant relatives of persons already resident in Australia, or persons with 500 pounds landing money (increased from 40 pounds in 1931), or experts specifically required by the Commonwealth for some special industry, would be allowed entry.

Throughout the 1920s, some Jewish immigration had been permitted, though subject to the restrictions applied to nationals of the quota countries identified by the government. Suzanne D. Rutland has shown that numerous cases of Jewish refugees from Poland in the 1920s were permitted entry, as they sought to escape antisemitic persecution in that country. In a similar vein, Jews in other eastern European countries sought a new life far away from the source of their misery. As Rutland observes, the 'peak of the Eastern European Jewish migration of the 1920s was reached in the years from 1926 to 1928, when up to 2,000 Jews entered Australia.'⁴² Of these, nearly 70 per cent settled in Melbourne;⁴³ the impact of the new arrivals on the local Jewish community was to transform its character and provide a framework into which later, post-1945 Jewish migrants were able to integrate.

The government was not impressed by the Jewish arrivals from Poland. A handwritten note from late 1926 summed up the attitude of the Department of Home and Territories thus:

We have always been desirous of avoiding facilitating the transfer to Australia of large numbers of *poor Jews*, as the tendency is for them to live in the poor portions of the cities and become exploited by the more enterprising business Jews.⁴⁴

Here the image of the poor Jew was employed as a justification for immigration restriction. Special measures concerning Polish Jews moved from the abstract to the real in 1925, with the adoption of special restrictions on the ground that they were of 'poor physique', spoke only Polish or Yiddish, and were not agriculturists or skilled labourers. They were, it was felt, 'a peculiarly backward class, living as their ancestors lived about 2,000 years ago [!], and not assimilating with the general community.'⁴⁵ The restriction placed over their entry gave British passport control officers in Poland the discretionary power to adjudge the suitability of intending immigrants, and to reject them in Poland before their applications even reached Australia. The Assistant Secretary of the department, F.J. Quinlan, noted that a protest might be raised when it was learned that Australia was discriminating against Jews as immigrants, but he informed the Minister that 'as many of these Polish Jews — particularly the illiterate and poorer types — are known to be anything but desirable, the Department will be prepared to meet any such protests that may be made.'⁴⁶ The memorandum outlining the new restrictions contained a paragraph which, in just a few words, managed to sum up the stance of the government towards

Polish Jews throughout the entire interwar period: 'An influx of this class would be decidedly unsatisfactory ... If a large number came they would probably tend to form into communities.'⁴⁷

It should be noted that these restrictions pertained to a single group, Polish Jews, and were not specific to all Jews as such. The government's main interest lay for the most part in restricting the entry of people from distinct *national groups*, rather than segments of them, and as Jews did not yet have a national homeland which could come under the government's regulations, it was only through arranging special conditions — such as for the Polish Jews — that a measure of Jewish restriction was carried out. The days of framing policies specifically for Jewish immigrants were still in the future, and would only come with the arrival of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933.

Generally speaking, how did the Australian public view the evolution of the Commonwealth's alien immigration policy in the 1920s? The state of public opinion helped the government to determine its immigration stance, and it is necessary at this point to examine some of the responses of the Australian people in order to establish the expressed priorities of which the government had to take cognisance.

No Australian immigration policy could be formed or operated without taking the state of public opinion into account. The new United Australia Party government of Joseph Lyons in 1932 was no less aware of this than its predecessor the Nationalist Party had been. Popular attitudes on foreign migration could not be dismissed by those who were responsible for making policy, and such attitudes on the whole saw the issue only in terms of its current (rather than its long-term) impact. It would be wrong to suggest that the forces influencing government between 1919 and 1932 were the same: in 1919 the major issue concerned repatriation from war-torn Europe and withdrawal from the outside world; in 1932 attitudes were heavily influenced by the Depression and the necessity to expand the economy while not expanding the population. Yet the government could not hope to address the interests of those it claimed to represent without paying attention to the views which were expressed with varying frequency throughout the 1920s. Australians responded to foreigners in particular ways, and in assessing that response we can look at the decade of the 1920s as a single unit. Australians seemed united: foreigners were unwelcome.

The response found expression in two key issues: reaction to a foreign presence in the midst of 'British Australia', and protest against continued foreign immigration. Both issues were ultimately concerned with the racial or economic effects on Australia of the European influx. There was continual talk throughout the 1920s of a lowering of 'standards' — to Australian 'stock', to living conditions, to employment provisions — which would take place if a foreign presence was to remain, or, worse, continue to grow. Australians turned inwards after the Great War in the hope of rebuilding: awareness of differences among Europeans became sharper, more clearly defined, and racial attitudes were more frequently expressed than beforehand. Australian society became unashamedly intolerant, and foreigners had no option but to know their place and stay there until they had proven themselves to be 'dinkum'.

Race-thinking in general, and theories of racial hierarchy in particular, came into vogue in Australia in the 1920s. In fact, there were frequent calls throughout the decade for the introduction of immigrants from those nations which were 'racially compatible' with the Australians. This was, after all, an underlying motive behind the removal of the ban on ex-enemy aliens, such as Germans, in 1925. Scandinavians, too, were seen as highly desirable on racial grounds. The *Argus* (the voice of middle-class conservatism in Victoria), commenting on the descendants of early Scandinavian immigrants to Australia, noted in 1927 how they had 'enriched the Commonwealth with a considerable infusion of good Nordic blood.' It informed its readership that 'The Scandinavians are home-lovers and home-builders. The women are splendid housewives, and their tastes conform to the Australian standard of good living.' The *Argus* stated that there seemed no reason for doubting that a blend of the Scandinavian and Australian races 'would be stimulating for Australia.'⁴⁸

Sir Elliot Johnson (Nationalist, Lang, NSW), in the House of Representatives, agreed. In the likelihood of Australia being unable to attract sufficient numbers from the United Kingdom, he believed that the Scandinavian countries should be appealed to. He noted that their people were 'vigorous, law abiding and industrious, and possess all the characteristics which make for good citizenship.' By way of contrast with the southern Europeans, Scandinavians were 'less hysterical, more solid and phlegmatic, and more attuned to British temperament.'⁴⁹ Their assimilation took place very quickly and they were not seen to pose a threat to the Australian way of life. The main problem was that they did not seem to want to come in numbers large enough to constitute a welcome influx.

The most important agents of opposition were the labour movement, its political party (the ALP), and other populist organisations and voices of opinion. The tempo of opposition was to increase as economic conditions worsened from 1925 right through the Depression. The catalyst for this was in many cases a desire on the part of employers to reduce wages and deny arbitration at a time of mass unemployment. Related to this, when workers went on strike over pay and conditions, was the use of immigrants as strikebreakers. The obvious reaction on the part of Australian workers was rigorously to oppose immigration whenever possible.

Yet to some broadminded people, Italians and other southern Europeans did not present this problem. While being attacked on all sides because of their liberal immigration policy, government members occasionally took the time to answer their critics with commonsense arguments showing the hypocrisy of such criticism. Senator Walter Duncan (Nationalist, NSW) offered one such reply. During a reading of the Supply Bill in 1925, he addressed the opposition Labor Party with the following words:

Honourable senators opposite object to the immigration of Italians, yet they belong to a party which has as one of its members sitting in another chamber the son of an Italian. They object to the immigration of Southern Europeans and in the next breath talk proudly of Mr. Theodore, who is the son of a Southern European. They object to immigrants generally, yet they give to immigrants from Heaven knows where some of the most important

positions in the gift of the Labour movement in Australia. When we remember things such as these, we recognise that honourable senators opposite are talking with their tongues in their cheeks.⁵⁰

The radical weekly journal the *Bulletin* was even more outspoken on this issue, but, somewhat surprisingly given its previous history as one of the leading advocates of a white and British Australia, was all for Italian immigration. Once Italians were admitted to the Commonwealth, it argued, 'no subsequent attempt at differentiating against them can be legally sustained.' While unions were opposed to the introduction of Italians on the ground that they lowered standards in Australia, the *Bulletin* pointed out that the Italian 'will not work except for union rates and union hours.' It was the 'hostile spirit' of the unions which encouraged Italians to be 'clannish', notwithstanding the fact that they were 'hard-working, sober, thrifty, and law-abiding.' The *Bulletin* was adamant that 'it is bad policy from the white Australia point of view to discriminate against them after we have permitted them to land.'⁵¹ An explanation for this can be found in the *Bulletin's* approach to racial matters, which had always been drawn along colour lines. For the *Bulletin*, any white nationalities were preferable as immigrants if their arrival resulted in building Australia's white population sufficiently to defend the country against an Asian influx. It was to change its stance later, when Jewish refugee immigrants began arriving; but for most of the interwar period it remained consistent in its welcome of all Europeans regardless of national origin.

A seeming lone voice in the labour movement, R.C. Jones, was another who saw the folly of racial discrimination. Asking 'ARE AUSTRALIANS BROADMINDED?' in *Labor Call*, his conclusion was that they were not. He observed that it did not really matter what the justification was for Australians' negative attitudes; the fact was that any reason was 'founded on racial prejudice.' He pleaded with his fellow-unionists to 'cut out at once this non-union attitude', and then delivered an impassioned message:

It is rank hypocrisy to sing 'The Red Flag', and immediately afterwards talk of 'Blasted Dagoes.' If it is true that 'United We Stand, divided we fall', what is the use of looking for a fall by creating race divisions? If 'The Brotherhood of Man' and the 'Unity of Labor is the Hope of the World' are true ideals and not merely catch phrases of the ignorant, let us try to understand the foreign worker amongst us and above all let us try and make him understand us. For after all abuse will only drive us farther apart and will not rally us to the call of 'Workers of the world unite!'⁵²

Jones' call fell on deaf ears. The commentator 'Vig', writing in *Labor Call*, had already expressed the essence of rank-and-file labour opposition when in 1922 he asked:

What does white Australia mean? Does the policy mean supplanting white Australians with foreigners? If the battle 40 years ago is going to result in Italians taking the PLACE OF WHITE AUSTRALIANS, then the Commonwealth policy has not succeeded ...⁵³

While Australian labour had nothing against individual foreigners, 'Vig' believed, 'when they are dumped down in batches, to the detriment of the Australian worker, it becomes objectionable.' The threatened or actual

displacement of Australian workers indeed did become the major source of labour opposition to a foreign presence. Throughout the 1920s, both grass-roots and Party protests put forth the same argument: European immigrants were taking employment from Australian workers.

Concern about the employment position was not confined to the labour movement, though expressions most frequently came from that source. The Australian Natives' Association, for example, which concentrated its efforts on immigration restriction because of racial concerns, identified with the cause of labour in South Australia in 1927. At a meeting of that State's ANA Board of Directors, a resolution was carried which called on the State government to 'give preference to Australian born in place of persons from foreign parts in obtaining employment.' The Association observed how the time may soon come 'when the foreign element will endeavour to monopolise our industries.' Placing foreigners on a commensurate level to Australians in employment was 'decidedly Anti-Australian, and certainly vital to racial purity.'⁵⁴ The Premier of South Australia had himself expressed a similar opinion nearly three years before, when he wrote to the Prime Minister that the foreigners arriving in his State 'will without doubt further dislocate the local Labor Market', and would 'also tend to lower the standard of living, ... as only a small number of the foreigners are women [which will] create a sex and moral problem which will prove difficult to solve.'⁵⁵ Displacement of Australian workers was one thing; but the possibility of lowering living standards or the blending of racial stocks was something that would flow on to all Australians regardless of class or occupation.

Related to this was the protest over another form of displacement, prosecuted with considerable vigour by the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA). It began early in the 1920s, and concerned the affront to the memory of Australia's war dead by their substitution in society by foreigners. The RSSILA gave considerable emphasis to support of British (preferably ex-service) immigration, and a 'xenophobic fervour ... accompanied protest against an alleged 'influx of aliens' from south-east Europe.'⁵⁶ One such protest, from the Brisbane sub-branch of the League, referred to the way in which Australian men had 'sold their Sugar Cane farms to go to the War', only to find on their return that 'Italian settlers had during their absence purchased large blocks of sugar land.' The result was that 'there was no land available for sale which could be recommended, except at a very large figure, beyond the limit of the resources of the average working settler.'⁵⁷

Protests of a more impassioned nature came from the fathers of former servicemen, who had formed a national body called the Sailors' and Soldiers' Fathers' Association. In 1925 a series of meetings throughout the various State branches concluded that something needed to be done to call a halt to foreign immigration. The Queensland group was the first to pass a resolution on the issue, and they were followed quickly by the group in Hobart. The latter resolution referred, in part, to 'the insult offered to Australia's 59,300 dead soldiers by the Commonwealth Government filling their places with the mixed races now coming to Australia.'⁵⁸ A later resolution, from the Toowoomba

(Queensland) branch, suggested to the Prime Minister that he need 'no reminding that Australias [*sic*] 60,000 soldier sons did not die to make room for such immigrants.'⁵⁹

Throughout the decade, many RSSILA sub-branches sought the restriction of southern European immigration under the terms of the White Australia policy.⁶⁰ By about 1927, though, as those former soldiers who had still not been able to obtain regular employment started to become an embarrassment to both the government and the community, the link between their problems and those of the workers became more firmly established. Discontent came to a head at an ex-soldiers' convention in Sydney in August 1927, when the government was urged to control the 'influx of undesirables', whose presence 'was repugnant to Australia.' One of the main concerns was that southern Europeans were finding work in Australia, while 'civilians and former soldiers' were not. This situation could only cease when the Federal government exercised tight control over the migration of 'these people.'⁶¹

Many Australians were fearful that the time for resolutions was past. Even as early as 1922, *Labor Call* was suggesting that ex-soldiers on the Queensland canefields would soon have to take up arms to defend themselves and fight for rights which had been eroded by the foreign influx. Alluding to the Great War, the paper said that the ex-soldiers 'did not go 12,000 miles to fight the foreigner to have him given preference within his own gates'; and again, foreigners supplanting Australians 'is not ONLY A SLUR ON THE AUSTRALIANS, but a gross injustice to the fighting man, who went forth at the bugle call to make this country safe for a job.'⁶² When a confrontation took place between striking Australian workers and non-unionised Maltese labour in 1927, one of the strike leaders resolved that if the government 'allow the scum of Southern Europe' to menace 'good Australians', there was only one course left open: 'we shall have to take the law into our own hands and exterminate the vermin.'⁶³

Excluding immigrants (other than ex-enemies) by nationality was, as we have seen, not part of the government's policy until after 1925, but calls to do so were almost simultaneous with the first postwar European arrivals. In 1920 a letter to the editor of the *Argus* asked whether the country was yet prepared for a policy in which 'the doors of Australia' would be opened 'to any individual who may choose to come here.'⁶⁴ Calls for restriction then began to increase at a level commensurate with immigrant arrivals. Even though the quota scheme was introduced in 1925, public concern did not cease. On the contrary, protest continued with considerable energy, and came from the same sources. With 1927 as the year of greatest European ingress, objections came thick and fast. The Australian Natives' Association had not eased its campaign for total exclusion, and branch meetings in Victoria concluded that the alien influx was responsible 'for the position in regard to unemployment.'⁶⁵ In South Australia, the ANA held that 'immediate steps should be taken ... to check immigration from Countries bordering the Mediterranean.'⁶⁶ The Loyal Orange Lodge protested throughout 1927, and a letter to Bruce remonstrated against the number of Italians being permitted to enter. Their introduction tended 'to

lower the moral & living conditions prevailing in Australia.' The Lodge begged Bruce to prevent the introduction in such numbers of 'this dirty Anti-British crowd.'⁶⁷ Anyone who was foreign fell into this category.

The labour movement maintained its attitude after Bruce's about-face on 1925. When in 1927 the French ship *Commissionaire Ramel* docked in Melbourne carrying 823 passengers — nearly all immigrants of Russian, Cypriot, Syrian, Greek, Roumanian, Estonian, Bulgarian, Yugoslav and Jewish origin — *Labor Call* declared that it was now time to put a stop to 'this unwholesome flood.' If the Federal government was not prepared to do so, the government of Victoria would have to 'find a way to close the gates.'⁶⁸ At the State Conferences of the ALP in South Australia and Western Australia, resolutions were carried calling for the cessation or suppression of foreign immigration on economic grounds.⁶⁹ Finally, alluding to ideas of racial superiority reminiscent of previous years, *Labor Call* made the definitive statement on the issue in February 1928: 'Up to now our breed and type has been fairly good, and the present tendency is to let in anybody ... Surely it is worth while keeping up our high standards, and that can be done by keeping out inferior humans.'⁷⁰

Language of this nature came from a time when the subtleties of diplomatic language and awareness of 'civilised' countries other than Australia or Britain had yet to become fully internalised by the Australian people, and it cannot be denied that the conservative political leaders of the early 1920s were in manner, as well as in their immigration policy, out of step with the people they governed. The rough-and-tumble style of Billy Hughes was closer to the hearts of returned soldiers and the working class than the imperial style of S.M. Bruce. Ideas expressed in the former's urgent and offensive style had a greater appeal to the majority of Australians than did the more far-reaching plans which followed him, and tolerance levels for any who deviated from it were far from high. The destruction experienced in the trenches brought home to many the necessity of living for today; desires had to be met with an immediacy not seen before.

Consequently, talk of the long-term *positive* effects of European immigration was hardly popular. Few wanted to advocate it, and fewer still wanted to hear about it. Australia would not be ready for large-scale immigration from Europe until another war brought home to everybody its necessity and attractiveness. Before that, however, the Depression, and a new dilemma concerning immigration (this time dealing with the moral question of whether to admit unwilling immigrants who did not want to leave their homes but had to as refugees), served to forge and temper that change in attitudes. By 1945 the change would be far from complete. But after the bleak prospects of the 1920s, its ultimate emergence should be viewed as a vindication of Bruce's approach, and perhaps as a tribute to his far-sightedness.

What did all this mean so far as future Jewish migration was concerned? It is quite clear that the administrative infrastructure Australia was going to take into the 1930s was in place by the end of the 1920s: landing money, landing permits, a relationship with British passport control officers on the

scene in Europe, pre-existing policies of discrimination, a quota system, antisemitic bias, ready-made rationales justifying the government's restrictive position. Policies regarding the migration of Jewish refugees from the Nazis did not emerge out of the blue; they were improvised, certainly, but they slotted into a pre-existing framework that had been developed for the very purpose of restricting immigrants of various classes rather than dealing with them on a case-by-case basis. The Australian people, too, had an anti-foreign bias which would not bode well for German and Austrian Jews (and even more, Polish or other eastern European Jews) in the 1930s.

Far from being made in a vacuum, Jewish refugee policy would be the product of what were, by 1933, already long-established practices. All it took was the manipulation of those practices to the specific end of restricting Jewish entry, and the immigration machinery would swing into action. In this context, the first policy statement circulating in the Department of the Interior in mid-1933 can best be understood. When an Australian resident sought permission to introduce from Germany his brother (and accompanying wife and child), the Minister assented; the bureaucrats, noting that this might be the harbinger of many future such applications, asked the Minister what the general policy should be from now on. By way of response, Cabinet's opinion was expressed clearly by the Minister of Defence and External Affairs, Sir George Pearce, who minuted on behalf of the Prime Minister that Cabinet approved the view 'as to care being exercised to prevent a serious influx' of Jews.⁷¹ This brief was to govern Australian refugee policy *vis-a-vis* Jews until 1945, a child of its time conceived using methods that were completely natural and expected. The only thing surprising about the government's position in 1933 is that after the Holocaust some Australians, both Jews and non-Jews, expressed shock that it took the form it did. In reality, there was nothing out of place in the government's refugee policy; it continued in the manner laid out during the previous decade, adapting to changing circumstances while retaining its essential character intact. By adopting a long view, we can see that Australian refugee policy in the 1930s was not an accident, but rather the result of forces that had been set in train long before a German refugee issue ever existed.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, the following: Michael Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees, 1933-1948*, Sydney: Croom Helm Australia, 1985; Hilary L. Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia: A Thematic History*, vol. 1, 1788-1945, Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1991; Suzanne D. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, Sydney: Collins Australia, 1988; and Paul R. Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust, 1933-45*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1994. An alternative viewpoint is to be found in W.D. Rubinstein, 'Australia and the Refugee Jews of Europe 1933-1954: A Dissenting View', *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*, vol X, part 6 (May 1989), pp. 500-23. All authors have written widely beyond the works mentioned above, and serious scholars are advised to look to the complete *corpus* of their works if a full picture is to be seen.
- 2 In 1994 I made a start by looking at the structure of the Public Service so far as migration matters were concerned. See Paul R. Bartrop, 'Foreign Immigration between the Wars: The Role of the Public Service', in J.J. Eddy and J.R. Nethercote (eds), *Towards National*

Administration: Studies in Australian Administrative History, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1994, pp. 157-67.

- 3 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) A1, file 34/4359, 'Germans. Removal of Restrictions on', Home and Territories memorandum (*Germans and Other Former Enemy Aliens*) prepared by A.R. Peters, 20 November 1925; typewritten minute to Prime Minister, 24 November 1925.
- 4 NAA A457, file Q400/2, 'Restrictions. Non-British Immigrants. General Papers', draft of letter from Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to Hon. Secretary, Council of Eacham District Local Bodies, Yungaburra (Qld), n.d. (September 1922?)
- 5 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (hereafter CPD), House of Representatives (hereafter H. of R.), vol. 94, 22 November 1920, p. 6782.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 6779.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 19 November 1920, p. 6756.
- 8 NAA A457, file K400/2, 'Absorption of continental peoples', Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, to Official Secretary to the Commissioner for Australia in the USA, New York, 24 January 1922.
- 9 NAA A457, file Q400/2, 'Restrictions. Non-British Immigrants. General Papers', Secretary, Department of Home and Territories, to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 29 July 1922.
- 10 NAA A981, file Migration 48, 'Migration Restrictions — Australia. Italians, Policy', Secretary, Home and Territories Department, to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 19 April 1923.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 NAA A458, file B156/1 Part 1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy — Correspondence with States', Prime Minister to Premier of South Australia, 26 September 1924. Sir George Pearce, as the Minister responsible for immigration in 1922, had been similarly inclined. His attitude was that any action 'which would discriminate between the nationals of certain European countries included in the League of Nations, might possibly lead to international complications' (NAA A457, file Q400/2, Secretary, Home and Territories Department, to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 29 July 1922).
- 15 *Smith's Weekly*, 17 June 1922, p. 19.
- 16 *Argus* (Melbourne), 22 April 1922, p. 7.
- 17 *Smith's Weekly*, 5 July 1924, p. 9.
- 18 CPD, Senate, vol. 116, 5 October 1927, p. 200.
- 19 *Labor Call*, 5 February 1925, p. 2.
- 20 NAA A458, file P156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', *Notes of a Deputation from the Australian Natives' Association which Waited on the Prime Minister*, 8 December 1927.
- 21 CPD, H. of R., vol. 116, 17 November 1927, p. 1567.
- 22 NAA A458, file B156/1 Part 1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy — Correspondence with States', draft letter from Minister for Home and Territories to Premier of South Australia, n.d. (early 1925?)
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Argus*, 12 May 1925, p. 5.
- 26 *Table Talk*, 24 August 1919, p. 4.
- 27 NAA A981, file Communism 10, 'Communist Activities in Aust.', memorandum to Secretary, Attorney-General's Department, from Director, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, 20 January 1922.
- 28 *Sun News-Pictorial* (Melbourne), 20 September 1923.
- 29 NAA A458, file L156/2, 'Immigration Restrictions. Particular classes and nations, Miscellaneous', Acting Prime Minister to G.C. Fuller, Premier, NSW, 29 October 1923.
- 30 NAA A981, file Communism 8 Pt 1, 'Russia — Bolshevism and Communist

- Organisation', Department of External Affairs report, *Communism in the Soviet Union (Russia)*, 23 September 1925.
- 31 *Age* (Melbourne), 1 April 1925, p. 11.
- 32 NAA A434, file 49/3/3196, 'Admission of Jews to Australia', Home and Territories memorandum (*Polish Jews*) prepared by A.R. Peters, 30 September 1925.
- 33 NAA A1, file 34/4359, 'Germans. Removal of Restrictions on', Home and Territories memorandum (*Germans and Other Former Enemy Aliens*) prepared by A.R. Peters, 20 November 1925; handwritten minute by S.M. Bruce, 24 November 1925.
- 34 *Ibid.*, handwritten minute by Sir George Pearce, 25 November 1925.
- 35 CPD, H. of R., vol. 116, 29 September 1927, p. 101.
- 36 NAA A458, file P156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', F.J. Quinlan to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 23 January 1928.
- 37 NAA A981, file Migration 48, 'Migration Restrictions — Australia. Italians, Policy', Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (United Kingdom), 24 April 1928.
- 38 NAA A367, file C3075 AG, 'Report of Interdepartmental Committee on Migration and Control of Aliens', Interior memorandum (*White Alien Immigration*) prepared by J.A. Carrodus, 2 August 1937.
- 39 NAA A367, file C3075 C, 'Alien Immigration/Passports and Laws Governing Admission/Statistics/Landing Permits', F.J. Quinlan to Director, Investigation Branch, Attorney-General's Department, 24 July 1928.
- 40 *Ibid.*, F.J. Quinlan to Collectors of Customs, all States and Darwin, 21 December 1928.
- 41 NAA A367, file C3075 AG, 'Report of Interdepartmental Committee on Migration and Control of Aliens', Interior memorandum (*White Alien Immigration*) prepared by J.A. Carrodus, 2 August 1937.
- 42 Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 147.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 NAA A434, file 49/3/3196, 'Admission of Jews to Australia', handwritten minute from F.J. Quinlan, for information of Minister, undated, but appended to a letter from Rabbi Francis Lyon Cohen, 15 October 1926 (emphasis in text).
- 45 *Ibid.*, Home and Territories memorandum (*Polish Jews*), prepared by A.R. Peters, 30 September 1925.
- 46 *Ibid.*, handwritten minute by F.J. Quinlan, 30 September 1925.
- 47 *Ibid.* For a discussion of Jewish migration generally throughout the interwar years, see Paul R. Bartrop, 'Good Jews' and 'Bad Jews': Australian Perceptions of Jewish Migrants and Refugees, 1919-1939', in W.D. Rubinstein (ed.), *Jews in the Sixth Continent*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987, pp. 169-84.
- 48 *Argus*, 6 July 1927, p. 27.
- 49 CPD, H. of R., vol. 116, 17 November 1927, p. 1567.
- 50 CPD, Senate, vol. 110, 25 June 1925, p. 410. The Member referred to was H.P. Lazzarini, the ALP Member for Werriwa (NSW), later Minister for Home Security in the Curtin, Forde and Chifley governments. Mr Theodore was E.G. Theodore, best known as Premier of Queensland and later as Federal Treasurer in the Scullin government.
- 51 *Bulletin*, 8 July 1926, p. 12.
- 52 *Labor Call*, 11 August 1927, p. 7.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 27 April 1922, p. 2 (emphasis in text).
- 54 NAA A458, file 156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', George Waterford (General Secretary, South Australian Board of Directors, Australian Natives' Association) to Premier of South Australia, 11 August 1927.
- 55 NAA A458, file B156/1 Part 1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy — Correspondence with States', Premier, South Australia, to Prime Minister, 12 November 1924.
- 56 G.L. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966, p. 68.

- 57 NAA A1, file 26/6291, 'RSSILA Brisbane. Influx of Foreign Immigrants', George Lawson (Hon. Secretary, RSSILA Brisbane) to Colonel D.C. Cameron MHR, 8 April 1922.
- 58 NAA A458, file P156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', W.M. McHugo (Hon. Secretary, Sailors' and Soldiers' Fathers' Association of Tasmania) to Prime Minister Bruce, 3 February 1925.
- 59 *Ibid.*, Edwin Price (Hon. Secretary, Sailors' and Soldiers' Fathers' Association, Toowoomba) to Prime Minister Bruce, 15 June 1925.
- 60 Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism*, p. 68.
- 61 *Argus*, 15 August 1927, p. 19.
- 62 *Labor Call*, 29 June 1922, p. 1 (emphasis in text).
- 63 *Ibid.*, 14 July 1927, p. 10.
- 64 *Argus*, 25 November 1920, p. 9.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 27 May 1927, p. 11.
- 66 NAA A458, file P156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', George Waterford (General Secretary, South Australian Board of Directors, Australian Natives' Association) to Senator A.J. McLachlan, 23 September 1927.
- 67 *Ibid.*, C.K.B. White (Secretary No. 16 District, Loyal Orange Lodge, Parkes) to Prime Minister Bruce, 25 June 1927.
- 68 *Labor Call*, 6 October 1927, p. 12.
- 69 NAA A458, file P156/1, 'Immigration Restrictions. Australian Policy General File', F.F. Ward (Secretary, South Australian Branch, Australian Labor Party) to Prime Minister Bruce, 11 October 1927; and E.H. Barker (General Secretary, Western Australian Branch, Australian Labor Party) to Prime Minister Bruce, 18 October 1927.
- 70 *Labor Call*, 9 February 1928, p. 8.
- 71 NAA A434, file 49/3/7034, 'Admi. of German Jews — Cabinet Decision re.', handwritten minute by Sir George Pearce, 2 June 1933.