

Were the 1960s an
important decade in
australia history
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The 1960's were a vastly important decade in Australian political history. It was a decade of political and social upheaval in Australia. The children of the post-war era began reaching maturity and exerting their influences and ideologies onto the Australian cultural landscape (Aitkin, 1977). The 1960's, through its sociological, cultural and political movements, would shape and influence Australian politics for years to come. These influences were reflected by large-scale protests and public demonstrations against conscription, the Vietnam War and established rules and restrictive morals (Alomes, 1983). They campaigned for independence and equality of women in the workplace, fairer wages, a free accessible system of education, and the recognition of for rights of Indigenous Australians (Brett, Gillespie & Goot, 1994). Many of these demonstrations were reflective of wider social movements taking place in other Western countries, namely America, which greatly influence Australian culture and politics at the time (Bowman & Gratten, 1989). These main issues of the Vietnam War, Indigenous rights and equality for women played vastly important roles in the Australian political landscape of the decade.

During the 1960's, there remained three main political parties in Australia, being the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party, and the Country Party. The ALP was perceived to be a mildly left-of-centre socialist party which represented the rights of the workers against those of the employers (Parkin, Summers & Woodward, 2002). The ALP held power during the years of 1941-1949, and was defeated following fears within the electorate that its plan to nationalise the banks in 1949 meant that it was moving too far to the left of the political spectrum (Aitkin, 1977). The Liberal party were perceived

a mildly right-of-centre conservative party which was created out of the remains of the United Australia Party which had dissolved as a consequence of losing government in 1941 due to the no-confidence motion in the then Prime Minister Robert Menzies (Whittington, 1969). The Country Party was a mix of elements of both the left and right, and was designed to represent the interests of the country residents and farmers of Australia (Brett, Gillespie & Goot, 1994). Robert Menzies, following losing power in 1941, was then re-elected in 1949 after skilfully making use of the electorate's fears of Communism. This "kicking the Communist can" policy was an electoral tactic which the Liberals used time and time again as a means of keeping the ALP in Opposition (Cain, 1997). Robert Menzies served as Australia's Prime Minister throughout the 1960s, until his retirement in January 1966. He was replaced by Harold Holt, who faced the challenge of defending Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War (Bowman & Gratten, 1989). On 17 December 1967, Holt went swimming at Cheviot Beach in Victoria. He was never seen again and two days later was officially presumed dead, and his remains have never been found (Frame, 2005). After Holt's disappearance, John Gorton was elected as the new Prime Minister, and in 1968, in the face of mounting opposition to the war, Gorton announced that no more Australian troops would be sent to Vietnam.

The Vietnam War acted as the backdrop for Australia's cultural and political landscape in the 1960's, and was perhaps the most influential factor during the period. When war broke out between Communist North Vietnam and Democratic South Vietnam in 1959, America and her allies, including Australia, sent thousands of troops to Vietnam in an effort to contain the

spread of Communism (Edwards, 1997). It was announced that Australian combat troops, in the form of one infantry Battalion, with supporting elements, would be committed to the war in South Vietnam, on 29 April 1965 (Langley, 1992). The Liberal Government was criticised by the Opposition as well as by a strong vocal middle-class minority. This vocal minority was made up of numerous dignitaries, including Bishops of various denominations, who were extremely critical of the policies of the rapidly changing South Vietnamese Governments (Mendes, 1993). They believed that the Australian Government should instead seek a negotiated settlement of the conflict, rather than sending more military aid (Bowman & Gratten, 1989). As a result of the decision to send combat troops to the region, Australian conscripts would for the first time serve outside Australia or its territories, and north of the Equator, something which had had not even occurred in World War II (Ham, 2007). This decision particularly incensed the Opposition leader who held to the ALP's longstanding opposition to conscription for service not in the direct defence of Australia (Burgmann, 1993). In November 1964, the Commonwealth Parliament reintroduced compulsory military service (the National Service Scheme) (Edwards, 1997). Upon turning 20, if chosen by a lottery system, men were required to serve minimum two years' military service on a full-time basis in regular army units, and could be sent overseas (York, 1984). In total, around 50 000 Australians served in the conflict between 1965 and 1972 (Ham, 2007). Australians became divided over the issue of conscription, and it became an issue of radical protest throughout the decade. In 1965, the Save Our Sons movement was formed seeking the repeal of the National Service Act 1964 (Cth). The Movement, led by women, campaigned against conscription

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and staunchly supported draft resisters (Langley, 1992). In the same year, Youth Campaign Against Conscription (YCAC) was formed, and later, in 1968, the Draft Resistance Movement was established, and the first man to be sent to a civilian jail for non-compliance was sentenced (Langley, 1992). The issue of conscription, as well as whether or not Australia should be involved in the war at all, became one of great national contention (Ham, 2007). While Draft Resistance never posed a direct threat to the number of conscripts required, the campaigns did have an increasingly political effect on the Government of the day, and was a factor in the election of the Whitlam Labor Party to power in December 1972, the first federal labor government in 23 years (Parkin, Summers & Woodward, 2002).

Australia's involvement in Vietnam was prompted by a very poor perception by the Government of world affairs at that time. Throughout the late fifties and sixties, Australian diplomatic circles were firmly convinced of a subversive "Communist Threat" outside Australia (Mendes, 1993). This threat, initially directed by Moscow, and later by Beijing, dominated Australian political and diplomatic thought for approximately fifteen years (Ham, 2007). However, it had roots which went much further back than that. As Frank Cain mentions, the members of the coalition government gained anti-Communist convictions well before the Second World War. He suggests that the "the road to Vietnam was not only paved with anti-radical and anti-communist rhetoric and actions, but that the non-Labor forces came to be prisoners of such rhetoric." (Cain, as cited in Ross, 1995)

The influence of the Vietnam War and the social upheaval which the opposition to the war caused played a major part in shaping the era of
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1960's politics. The protest movement which developed in opposition to the Vietnam War was unprecedented in its size and influence (Alomes, 1983). The war had prompted a broad spectrum of opposition; many of those who had seen the destruction caused by previous conflicts were vocal in their condemnation (Town, 2006). However, the most lasting legacy of the Vietnam War for the Peace Movement was that it mobilised a whole generation of young people from around the globe (York, 1984). It was ultimately the first demonstration of radical demonstration and opposition to an Australian government.

Along with the protests in regard to the Vietnam War, Indigenous issues came to a head in the 1960's. This decade saw the beginning of the modern land rights movement, the development of the first national organisation of Indigenous Australians - the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) - and the first widespread awakening by non-Aboriginal Australians to Indigenous claims for justice (Attwood & Markus, 1999). In 1961, North Queensland activists were instrumental in instigating the first public inquiry into 'floggings'; an aspect of the management regime on the state-run Hope Vale reserve (Goodall, 1996). In 1962, the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended to allow Indigenous Australians the right to enrol and to vote in federal elections, although some states were reluctant to enforce this ruling and delayed providing the same rights for state and local elections (Bennett, 2001). In 1966, Vincent Lingiari led approximately 200 Gurindji stockmen, women and children off Wave Hill cattle station in protest against intolerable working conditions and poor wages (Goodall, 1996). They established a camp at

Wattie Creek and began a nine-year struggle, which developed into a successful claim for the return of traditional Gurindji lands (Goodall, 1996). This movement, albeit following a prolonged struggle, was a major step forward in terms of Indigenous Relations. It was the uprising of political protest of the 1960's which paved the way for further land rights and native title claims. However, pertinent was the year of 1967. This year saw over 90% of Australians vote ' yes' in a referendum to recognise Indigenous peoples as citizens and allow them to be counted as part of the Australian population (AIATSIS, 1967). This result followed a long campaign by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians united, who demanded better rights for Indigenous people and highlighted the poor conditions in which many lived. They campaigned to remove discriminatory provisions from the Constitution of Australia, including several massive petitions and hundreds of public meetings campaigning for Indigenous Australians (Attwood & Markus, 1999). The referendum of 27 May 1967 approved two amendments to the Australian Constitution relating to Indigenous Australians (National Archives of Australia, 1967). It amended section 51, and removed section 127 from the Constitution. First was the phrase in Section 51 (xxvi) which stated that the Federal Government had the power to make laws with respect to

"...the people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws." (Constitution of Australia 1901 (Cth))

The referendum removed the phrase " other than the Aboriginal race in any State," giving the Commonwealth the power to make laws specifically in

relation to Aboriginal people (AIATSIS, 1967). The second was Section 127, which said:

“ In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives shall not be counted.”

(Constitution of Australia 1901 (Cth))

The referendum removed this section in its entirety from the Constitution (Attwood & Markus, 1999).

The overwhelming support for the ‘ Yes’ vote gave the Federal Government of the 1960’s a clear mandate to implement policies to benefit Aborigines. The referendum provided Indigenous Australians with a symbol of their political and moral rights. It occurred at a time when Aboriginal activism was accelerating and it was used as a kind of ‘ historical shorthand’ for all the relevant political events of the time, such as the demands for land rights by the Gurindji, the equal pay case for pastoral workers, and the ‘ Freedom Rides’ to end segregation in New South Wales (Town, 2006). Several landmark developments in Indigenous affairs occurred throughout the decade of the 1960s, cementing it as a period of strong activism and positive political change for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike, and as a momentous and significant era in Indigenous affairs and Australian politics.

The 1960’s was also a vastly important decade in terms of women’s rights in Australia. Throughout the 1960’s, many Australian women began to question the restrictive roles that society had assigned to them. Many women felt that there was more to life than raising children and taking care of the home

(Bevege, James & Shute, 1982). Others were dissatisfied at being confined to <https://assignbuster.com/were-the-1960s-an-important-decade-in-australia-history-essay/>

traditionally 'female' occupations such as teaching, nursing, administration and secretarial work (Encel, 1970). Women marched, protested and pressured governments in a bid to gain equal rights in all spheres of life including the workplace, education, politics and sport (Kramare & Spender, 2000). The second wave of Australian feminism began in the 1960s and significantly undermined legal and social barriers which made women the 'second sex' - a label which left women economically and legally subordinate in marriage, discriminated against and exploited in the work place, and denied access to reproductive and sexual freedom (Lake, 1999). The second wave of feminism achieved the elimination of discriminatory practices such as lower pay for female workers, and discrimination against women on the basis of their marital status (Aitkin, 1977). In 1969, feminist and political activist Zelda D'Aprano began working for the Meatworkers' Union. The meat industry was used as a test case for equal pay for women (Kramare & Spender, 2000). When the case failed, D'Aprano chained herself to the doors of the Arbitration Court building to protest against the decision. In December 1969, the Arbitration Commission granted women equal pay for equal work (Jerrard, 1999). The case established an important first principle that affected 18 per cent of women workers, mostly teachers and nurses (Lake, 1999). The second wave of feminism coincided with an outbreak of social movements struggling for the rights of other marginalised groups such as immigrants (particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds), Indigenous people, and people of colour, lesbians and gay men (Bevege, James & Shute, 1982). As the politics of discrimination were questioned, racism and patriarchy were identified as modes of exclusion of groups and individuals from citizenship. The activism of women which arose in the

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1960's cemented their rights to equal pay and changed the perception of women, to a degree, forever.

The 1960's was a decade of social, cultural, and political change throughout Australia, and a vastly important decade in Australian politics. The movements of protest against pertinent political issues, namely the Vietnam War, Indigenous affairs, and Women's rights issues, came to a head. It was a decade of political and social upheaval in Australia. Young people challenged the traditional values of their parent's generation and actively opposed the decisions of the government. Women demanded equal rights and began to question the restrictive roles that society had assigned to them. Others called for racial equality in terms of Indigenous affairs, challenging societal norms and the status quo to cement Indigenous peoples as equal citizens with equal rights. Many more demonstrated against the Vietnam War and conscription. Of such prominence was the issue of the Vietnam War that it is seen to have shaped the whole decade, socially, culturally and politically. Many of these protests were part of wider social movements taking place in other Western countries. Advances in communications technology meant that revolutionary ideas and voices of dissent could rapidly be transmitted and received around the world. The 1960's era was largely significant throughout many Western countries, however in Australia, not only did the era shed light on the opposition to the Vietnam War, but it provided women with equal rights, and was a major step forward in relations between the Australian government and Indigenous citizens. It was an era in which social and cultural mobilisation led to vast political advances and changes which would shape Australian politics for years to come.