How the white australia policy shaped australia history essay

Historically, immigration plays a major role in Australia. The White Australia Policy (WAP), and its eventual repeal, played a significant role in shaping Australia in the twentieth century. The White Australia Policy describes Australia's prejudiced approach to immigration, from federation until the late twentieth century. The Australian government gradually dismantled the policy, over a twenty-five year period, until it was completely removed in 1973. The policy was put into place for several reasons, such as racism, fear of invasion and concerns that the standard of living would decline if immigration was allowed. As a result of the WAP, Australia effectively insulated itself from its close Asian neighbours. However, the policy was seen as racist by many countries and resulted in Australian society being deprived of the social and economic benefits of cultural diversification and the development of strong economic links to what is now seen as the economic power house of Asia and the sub-continent. Following the dismantling of the policy, Australia received a large influx of immigrants, and new culture. Today, Australia considers itself to be a multicultural country, but hints of racism and the WAP are still present.

The Immigration Restriction Act (1901) was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Australian government following federation. This act was designed to ' place certain restrictions on immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited immigrants.'[1]One significant aspect of the Act was a dictation test, which was used to exclude unwanted immigrants. As part of this, immigrants were required to take a written test in one of a variety of languages, of which they usually had no prior knowledge. The Immigration Restriction Act became the

cornerstone of the WAP, and in 1919, Prime Minister Billy Hughes declared it ' the greatest thing we have achieved.'[2]

Attempts to keep Australia white started to fail around the time of World War II (WWII). During the war, large numbers of non-white refugees sought shelter in Australia. Most left voluntarily once the war ended, but some wanted to stay. Despite this, the immigration minister, Arthur Calwell had them deported. In 1949, however, Minister Holt allowed 800 non-European refugees, as well as Japanese war brides, to stay in Australia.[3]With this introduction of new people and culture, the landscape of the Australian population began to slowly change. This was Australia's first move towards a fair-minded immigration policy. The next was when non-Europeans with 15 years residence were allowed to become permanent Australian citizens, in 1957.[4]The revised Migration Act of 1958 put an end to dictation tests, and involved a straightforward permit system. This revised Act allowed ' distinguished' Asians the opportunity to immigrate.[5]

In 1966, it was declared that all races would be considered for immigration on the basis of their suitability, qualifications and ability to integrate readily. [6]This announcement was the turning point in abolishing the WAP, and non-European migration began to increase. In 1973, the Whitlam government introduced a policy prohibiting discrimination based on race. All migrants could now be eligible to citizenship after two and a half years of permanent residence.[7]The government also decided to sanction all international agreements involving immigration and race. In 1978, the government commissioned a review of immigration in Australia, and several new policies were introduced to encourage Australian population growth.[8]

The initial purpose of the WAP was to create an ethnically homogenous society, and to rebuild a ' British' nation in the South Pacific.[9]However, there was also a very racist side to the policy. The policy-makers hoped to keep Australia from being " contaminated" by non-European immigrants, especially Asians, who it was suspected, would do bad, " foreign" things (see Image 1, in Appendix). Ignorance was a key aspect of the WAP. Australians had no real understanding of other races, except that they were ' different'. This ignorance led to fear and mistrust. It was also feared that immigrants would take all available jobs, by accepting lower wages. A song written by Collins in the early twentieth century shows the fears and prejudice of the Australian people:

" They want cheap labor there is no doubt, for profit is their game; and if you fail to do what's right, you'll have yourselves to blame. So you who understand those things, go forth and spread the light – This is a land worth keeping free, do keep Australia White."[10]

A traditional objection to non-European immigration was that it would bring into Australia people of lower educational and living standards, which, in turn, would lower overall working and living conditions. However, the basis for this belief is entirely fictitious, as in the past, these immigrants have had higher qualifications than the native born Australians.[11]Another significant factor was Australia's isolation from the rest of the Western world and from mother England, on whom in relied. This isolation led to fear, and it was this fear which primarily drove the foreign policies of Australia. It was a vast country, with a very small population, and before WWII, Australia's main concerns were external threats, fear of Asian invasion (called Yellow Peril),

and fear of other nations expanding their empires.[12]Following the war, however, a turning point in Australian foreign policy was reached.

The WAP was eventually repealed because it became dysfunctional and impractical. After WWII, Australia's population was extremely depleted. Japans rapid advancement during the war convinced the government that Australia was not safe from foreign invasion while the population remained so small. It was decided that Australia would have to ' populate or perish'. [13]As a result, European migrants were strongly encouraged to come live in Australia. Later, when the number of settlers proved too small, immigrants of any race were allowed into Australia. Racial discrimination was also increasingly unacceptable following the atrocities of Nazi Germany. In foreign policy, Australia had to adapt to the changing world. Communism became the overriding concern, and Australia saw the need to improve its relationship with Asia, in order to have some protection close to home. Between 1946 and 1954 many Asian nations won their independence. As a result, Australia had to deal with these nations as equals. Some of these Asian nations became Australia's allies against Communism, and several became important trading partners.[14]

Sources suggests that dismantling the WAP was a ' contested but inevitable response to changing circumstances' and was accepted by most Australians. [15]The WAP policy limited Australia's world view, so that it focused disproportionately on distant Britain. Following the war, Britain no longer controlled the largest empire and this limited world view was no longer effective.[16]Basically, the WAP was no longer in the social, economical or political best interests of Australia.

The WAP affected Australia in several key ways. It deliberately insulated Australia from its surrounding countries, and this led to Australia being very isolated from the rest of the world. As a newspaper article from the time states,

"[Australia] must realise that the causes of her isolation partly lie in her own policies and actions … and that it can be ended… by a searching re-examination of those policies which have kept her alienated from her neighbours. The White Australia Policy [is] a standing affront …"[17]

This quote also highlights how Australia was seen by other countries at the time. People saw the country as very racist and were wary of Australia as a result. Even those immigrants Australia wanted (such as Europeans), were reluctant to move to such a proudly racist country. When the WAP was removed, however, Australia received a sudden, large influx of immigrants from all around the world. These immigrants have changed the Australian landscape, turning Australia into a multicultural country.

Australia changed dramatically towards the end of the twentieth and the start of the twenty-first century. With the sudden arrival of ' New Australians', came diverse cultures, religions and languages. Australia ceased to be simply a British outpost, devoted to the idea of White Australia based on fear of foreigners, and developed into a multicultural country, sharing in the economics and politics of the Asia-Pacific region. [18]Australia's current migration policy allows those from any country the opportunity to migrate to Australia, regardless of their culture, race, religion or language. Today, the government views Australia's racial diversity as " a

source of both social and economic wealth."[19]Tourism is now a major industry is Australia, with tourists spending $4. 3 billion in 1992. [20]Substantial shifts in cultural and ethnic background have resulted from mass immigration. Most Australian attitudes towards foreigners changed, as global attitudes evolved, and they came to understand other cultures and religions. Knowledge and beliefs about other countries have also advanced over the years. Television brings different cultures and influences to every Australian family. However, although many Australians have accepted the country's new role as a multicultural nation, there is still a strong undercurrent of racism in Australia.

Racism and the WAP still play a role in Australian foreign policy and Australia attitudes today. Official Australia is strongly committed to building effective links with Asia and to maintaining an immigration program with a large Asian component. Popular public attitudes are much less enthusiastic about an Asian-dominated future.[21]There are Australians who regret the WAP policy's demise. Many Australians are still wary of Asians, or any people who are different from themselves. Studies suggest that the motives that drove the desire for a white Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth century's, still exist in the twenty-first and continue to influence Australian national life. [22]

Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (from 1996-2007) won the 2001 election by promoting his anti-Immigration policy. His advertisements included phrases such as, ' we decide who comes to this country and in which circumstances they come' and ' a vote for your local Liberal team member protects our borders…'[23]He has also been quoted criticizing both

multiculturalism and Asian immigration. During his time as Prime Minister, Howard introduced tougher immigration laws, including more difficult English language tests, and higher skill requirements. Many critics heralded the arrival of ' the new " White Australia" Policy'.[24]Another politician with strong views about Australian immigration was Pauline Hanson, who ran the One Nation party. As Former Australian diplomat, Cavan Hogue, writes, ' One Nation has resurrected the ghost of the White Australia policy…'[25]One Nation wanted to reduce Australian immigration dramatically, and to abandon the policy of multiculturalism. Both these politicians strongly suggest that Australia is still a racist country. The issue of refugees is also very controversial in Australia at the moment, with many politicians promising to ' control' our borders and stop ' queue jumpers'. All these points show that Australia still bears the legacy of the White Australia Policy, even several decades after its supposed demise.

The White Australia Policy, and its eventual repeal, played a significant role in shaping Australia in the twentieth century. The policy was put into place for several reasons, such as racism, and fear of invasion and the lowering of living standards. This racist policy stopped immigration, and through this, stopped Australia from cultural and social advancement. Following the dismantling of the policy, Australia received a large influx of immigrants, and diverse, new culture. Today, Australia considers itself to be a multicultural country, but racism and the WAP still shape both Australian foreign policy and public attitude.

Appendix

Image 1: The Mongolian Octopus – Its Grip on AustraliaPhil May, The Bulletin, 21st August 1886.

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