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'THE "WHITE AUSTRALIA" POLICY MUST GO'

The Communist Party of Australia and immigration restriction

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The Australian far left has a long and conflicted history of engagement with the politics of whiteness. The Immigration Restriction Act, colloquially known as the 'White Australia Policy', was amongst the first acts of the newly created Australian commonwealth in 1901. It was strongly argued for by the left of politics, particularly the Australian Labor Party, who saw it as a means of securing the union movement's gains from cheap foreign labour. Against such a backdrop, this chapter examines the Australian far left's opposition to immigration controls, asking to what degree was its intervention significant in the eventual ending of the policy in 1973. Early, frustrated opposition to the policy by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was given energy by the end of World War II, which saw both the first cracks in the policy – as southern and eastern European migration was encouraged for the first time – and the emergence of a stronger line of far left critique. The CPA published a pamphlet interrogating White Australia in 1945 and opposed the deportation of Chinese refugees as well as a host of others in the immediate post-war era. At the same time, however, the CPA was calling for immigration quotas owing to housing shortages and opposed the immigration of particular nationalities, derided as 'Balts', who were seen as anti-communist.

The CPA's equivocal position was rejected in the early 1960s by the early actions of Australian New Left, who formed a group called Student Action to oppose White Australia, using strategies borrowed from the American civil rights movement. Yet, this and movements such as the Immigration Reform Group were more closely aligned with modernising currents in the ALP than the far left, which instead supported the struggles of Indigenous Australians and opposing the Vietnam War. This chapter concludes by considering this contradiction: that while protesting in solidarity with an Asian people seen as subjugated by imperialism, the Communist Party often remained on the side-lines practically, leaving the task of abolishing Australia's racist immigration policy to centrists in the ALP.

Labourism and 'White Australia'

Australia, a British colony since 1788, became a federated nation-state under a parliamentary democracy offering universal suffrage for both men and women over 21 (at federal level) in 1901. An eight-hour work day and minimum wage were legislated, and legalised trade unions were represented in parliament through the social democratic Australian Labor Party. Australian workers seemed to enjoy the same political and economic benefits enjoyed by the most advanced sections of the European working class.¹

However these benefits were only offered to those who were considered 'white', with Aboriginal and non-European (and in some cases, non-British) migrants being excluded from this 'worker's paradise'.² The legislative framework established at Federation explicitly excluded these groups of people, with the Constitution and the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902 removing citizenship status for the Aboriginal population and the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 effectively barring entry to non-European migrants, colloquially known as the 'White Australia Policy'.³

One of the important aspects of the 'White Australia Policy' was its protection of the rights of 'white workers'. In the late 1800s, various ethnic groups were recruited to perform certain jobs, such as Pacific Islanders in the sugar cane trade, Japanese pearl divers and Afghan cameleers, particularly in the tropics of northern Western Australia and Queensland. Kay Saunders has argued that Queensland created two segregated labour zones, incorporating a tropical zone with 'unfree, largely non-European labour force' and a more traditional urban/rural zone with 'an urban bourgeoisie, a skilled British workforce and small white farmers'.⁴

But this segregated colonial economy, promoted by the British and multinational companies, was not favoured by many Australian politicians or the trade union movement.⁵ Before 1901, these ethnic minorities had specific places within a colonial economy, but after Federation, the majority of employment was reserved for white workers, with several pieces of legislation severely restricting the access of non-white people to jobs. Until the 1960s, the organised labour movement in Australia worked to ensure that white (British and northern European) workers remained at the top of this hierarchy and were firmly attached to the concept of the 'White Australia Policy'.⁶

The industrial workers of the world

Neville Meaney has written:

There are no heroes who from the beginning of 'white Australia' fought against great odds... unless possibly they [were] members of the International Workers of the World (IWW) or the Australian Communist Party, and it would be a brave soul indeed who argued that case.⁷

And this was indeed the case. Prior to the formation of the Communist Party of Australia in 1920, the most prominent opponents to the White Australia Policy were the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the Wobblies). As part of an internationalist movement, the IWW opposed the racism and nationalism that was central to the mainstream labour movement in Australia at the time, taking aim at both the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) – the nation's largest – and various craft unions. In its paper *Direct Action*, the Wobblies stated:

The I.W.W. is a class organisation of the working class. It is organised upon the basis of the class struggle. Therefore it welcomes all members of the working class, irrespective of their varying creeds, colours, religious beliefs, languages, etc.⁸

The same article further outlined the programme of the IWW, stating that the organisation stood for 'Revolutionary Economic International working-class unity', which meant that 'coloured workers of the North have to be organised' and could not be ignored.⁹ 'They are an economic factor, either for or against the working class', the paper argued, 'They MUST be organised FOR their own class against the employers.'¹⁰

In an article criticising the craft unions for supporting the White Australia Policy, the IWW pointed out that 'craft unionists do not object to being robbed... of four-fifths of what they produce by a white purchaser of labour-commodity, but strongly object to being exploited by a gentlemen of colour'.¹¹ For the Wobblies, the real enemy were the bosses, not fellow workers from the colonial sphere. As A. E. Brown wrote in 1916:

Contrast the narrow parochial outlook evidenced by the "White Australia" policy with the world-outlook of Karl Marx, when he sent his famous cry down the ages: "Workers of all countries, Unite!"¹²

In his study of the Australian labour movement, Frank Farrell called the anti-racist and internationalist stance of the IWW 'crude, emotional, irresponsible, and escapist', as well as 'impractical'.¹³ The reason for this, Farrell argued, was that the IWW did not comprehend the central nature of racism and exclusionism to the protectionism of the Australian labour movement. Verity Burgmann has criticised Farrell's depiction of the IWW as stunted by their 'dogmatic internationalist purity', writing that if the IWW had abandoned its anti-racism, it would've lost much of its identity – 'anti-racism was a fundamental tenet of its ideology'.¹⁴ Burgmann has celebrated the Wobblies for issuing 'the first effective challenge ever to working-class racism in Australia',¹⁵ but the IWW was subsumed over the course of the 1920s by the Communist Party of Australia, who, by the end of the decade, were the foremost anti-racist and internationalist political party in Australia.

The Communist Party of Australia and the Comintern in the 1920s

The Communist Party of Australia was formed in 1920 and immediately applied for membership to the Communist International (Comintern). From the inception of the Comintern in 1919, the international communist movement was imbued with an anti-colonial agenda and agitated against the ‘colour bar’ that operated in the colonial sphere and in the former settler colonies, including Australia – what Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have described as ‘white men’s countries’.¹⁶ For example, the 1922 theses on the Eastern Question drafted at the Fourth Comintern Congress stated that ‘the international proletariat does not harbour any racial prejudice’ and any antagonisms between coloured and white workers served to fragment and weaken the unity of the workers’ movement.¹⁷ In an issue of *The Proletarian*, one of the pre-existing journals that became an outlet of the newly formed CPA, Pearl Hanks criticised the Australian worker for ‘ignor[ing] the existence of the colored man while they can, and when that is no longer possible, to meet him with open hostility’.¹⁸ Quoting the Indian member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Shapurji Saklatvala, Hanks reminded readers: ‘A dream of Communism for white races only is the height of folly, because... the industries in England cannot be taken over by the workers while the sources of raw material remain in the hands of the capitalists’.¹⁹

This realisation, Hanks argued, forced the conclusion ‘that we must give up either our color prejudice or our hopes of Communism’, further stating, ‘there is no justification for the color bar, because a civilisation which excluded the colored races would benefit only a comparative handful of the world’s inhabitants’.²⁰

Although anti-racist rhetoric was quickly incorporated into the Communist Party’s literature and the party platform, this did not necessarily transform into practical political activism, with the CPA continuing to campaign against ‘mass immigration’ and others in the party arguing that ‘race’ was not a significant issue for the CPA. For example, in 1922, Fred Wilkinson, in a report to the Comintern’s Anglo-American-Colonial Section, wrote that ‘employers want cheap coloured labour imported’, but wrote approvingly that the ‘trade unions are, of course, opposed to this’.²¹ In December 1924, *The Workers’ Weekly* claimed that ‘the boss class finds in immigration a powerful weapon for the degradation of the condition of the Australian workers’ conditions’.²² The paper seemed to lament the Australian labour movement was not strong enough ‘to control such dangers as immigration’ and argued that the strategy, for the time being, was to ensure that ‘immigrants were met at once and enrolled in unions’, with ‘an embargo imposed on all who refused’.²³ Another article from 1925 titled ‘Immigration Menace’ proclaimed that the Communist Party recognised ‘this present immigration campaign [by the Australian government and employers] is the biggest immediate problem before the Australian working class’.²⁴ To counter this, the CPA announced preparing material in Italian to appeal to migrant workers ‘to stand firm alongside Australian trade unionists in the fight for the preservation of the conditions which have been won only by the hard fighting of Australia’s workers’.²⁵ To

help build links with these Italian workers, the CPA called for 'an abandonment of all irritation tactics against the fellow workers who have been shanghaied across from Europe'.²⁶ A few weeks later, the CPA conceded: 'It is not immigration as such that troubles the working class in Australia. It is unemployment, and the cause of that is found in the anarchic character of the capitalist system.'²⁷

At the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in June 1924, Dora Montefiore, a veteran socialist and suffragist representing the CPA, admitted that the trade unions were opposed to non-white workers and acknowledged that 'it would be pointless to ignore the question of coloured workers'.²⁸ Montefiore argued that the CPA were not calling for 'bringing in cheap coolie coloured labour', but, influenced by Marx's 'Proletarian of all lands unite!', the position of the CPA was 'we cannot accept any exploitation of coloured workers, because any such exploitation is bound to be followed by reduction of the wages of white workers'.²⁹

Throughout the mid-1920s, the CPA continued to campaign against 'mass immigration', particularly government sponsored immigration from the British Isles (seen as a way of British imperialism transferring its poor to another part of the empire)³⁰ and from southern Europe. The Party argued that 'the wholesale importation of immigrant workers into Australia', was 'a deliberate attempt on the part of the capitalists to flood the country with cheap labour' and thus called upon Australian workers to 'take every possible step to combat the dangers of large scale immigration'.³¹ Labourers from Italy were specifically targeted by the Communist Party, with the party press identifying a particular 'problem' in Queensland where:

colonies of Italian workers have developed and their lack of knowledge of the English language and the hostility of certain unions... have forced these workers to become easy prey of the capitalist class and a menace to the conditions of the Australian workers.³²

But an edition of *The Workers' Weekly* from August 1927 warned against its readers being hostile towards Italian workers, reminding them:

The Italian workers did not drop from heaven, but, to the contrary, come from a country that experienced a working class revolution, with the Labor movement developed to a higher degree than in Australia. The Italian workers have been members of the Communist Party, Italian Labor Party and the trade union movement before their arrival out here and if given the opportunity they will demonstrate their trade union traditions equally with other workers that have done so here.³³

This highlighted a contradiction in the CPA's outlook towards immigration and the 'White Australia Policy'. While stressing that the unions still needed to 'protest against the State aided mass immigration of Labor',³⁴ the Party also emphasised that they were internationalists and 'welcome[d] workers from any land'.³⁵ The programme of the CPA during this period consisted of the following:

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1. To agitate for the discontinuance of state aided immigration schemes and international post war agreements.
2. To impress upon their trades unions the necessity of recruiting into their ranks all immigrants on arrival.
3. To advise their trade union and labor councils to affiliate to the Red International of Labor Unions... with the definite object of securing the unity of the rival organisations into an all inclusive trade union international organisation.³⁶

John Pepper, a Hungarian-American member of the Comintern's Anglo-American Secretariat harshly criticised the Communist Party of Australia's contradictory stance in 1926, in response to a report by the CPA's Edgar Ross on the 'Australian question'. Pepper called the white working class in Australia 'a proletariat with many privileges', which was reinforced by the White Australia Policy.³⁷ For Pepper, the Party 'did not fight energetically enough against the White Australia ideology of the workers' and warned that if the CPA 'does not want to become something similar to the official Labour [sic] Party, it had to combat the White Australia Policy'.³⁸ The following year, the CPA resolution declared:

In opposition to the chauvinistic and racial policy of the A.L.P. as manifested in its White Australia Policy, the C.P. must put forward a policy of opposition to State aided immigration whilst insisting on the elimination of all racial barriers in the Immigration Laws; at the same time formulating a programme for receiving and organising immigrant workers into the working class movement of Australia.³⁹

The conflicted agenda was agreed to by the Comintern as its own resolution on the 'Australian Question' put forward something similar, proposing that the Communist Party 'must conduct an ideological fight against [the] social chauvinism' of the Australian labour movement, by 'championing an internationalist policy', as well as 'insisting upon... free admittance for the workers of all countries'.⁴⁰ But at the same time, the Comintern called for the CPA to criticise and condemn the 'plans of the British and Australian governments for mass migration'.⁴¹ Robert Bozinovski has described this approach as the Party's 'commendable opposition to White Australia in the face of virulent racism', but also noted that the Comintern continued to complain that the CPA 'was not sufficiently vocal in its opposition'.⁴² Stuart Macintyre has suggested that this contradictory position was because of the social and political origins of the Communist Party and its attachment to the international communist movement. 'The concern for the purity of the race was a persistent theme of the Australian labour movement', Macintyre explained, and because the CPA was 'a by-product of that movement', as well as a 'member of an internationalist organisation committed to the unity of the workers of the world', the Party 'found itself torn between old habits and new loyalties'.⁴³

From the Third Period to World War II

Despite the sharpening of anti-colonial and anti-racist politics of the international communist movement during the 'Third Period' (between 1928 and 1934) and the greater focus on the Aboriginal struggle and Australian colonialism in New Guinea by the CPA, its position on the White Australia Policy largely stayed intact throughout the 1930s. As more southern European workers came to Australia fleeing the Great Depression and political upheaval in Europe, the Communist Party attempted to appeal to these workers. In an open letter in *The Workers' Weekly*, the CPA announced:

The Communist Party of Australia, as the only internationalist party in this country, presents itself to you, the emigrant workers, Maltese, Italians, Greeks, Yugo-Slavs, and toilers of all other nationalities, as the only political party defending your interests and consistently carrying out a programme and policy leading to emancipation, to bread and work and freedom for all members of our class.⁴⁴

But the Party still campaigned against state aided migration programmes, arguing that while the CPA 'want[ed] to see Australia populated' and 'want[ed] to see [a] great, growing and economically secure working-class population', they insisted that 'the State mass migration schemes must be resisted'.⁴⁵

The rise of fascism in Europe also shifted the Communist Party's thinking about immigration and anti-racism. Since the 1920s, Italians had come to Australia to escape the Fascist regime under Benito Mussolini and after the Nazi's ascension to power in 1933, a small number of Germans fled to Australia, followed by a small number of Jewish refugees in the late 1930s (who were initially refused permission by the Australian government).⁴⁶ These refugees from fascism ignited sympathy amongst many Australian workers, with the Communist Party, trading on its anti-fascist credentials, pushing for a greater intake of refugees and criticising the Australian government for its racialism. In August 1937, the Party castigated the Lyons government and the mainstream press for using 'the language of Hitler' in referring to incoming migrants as 'undesirable' and 'physically and mentally inferior'.⁴⁷ 'This question of "superiority" and "inferiority" in races', the Party editorialised, 'is one of the vilest features of fascism and its ideology', and was also, according to the CPA, 'one of the most effective weapons in the hands of capitalism for splitting their ranks'.⁴⁸

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the CPA campaigned for a greater intake of refugees from Europe. For example, an editorial from February 1939 stated:

The great Australian labor movement must fight for the rescue of these [refugees], our brave fellow-workers. The working class must see that these destitute people of our own class are not allowed to starve or be returned to the fascist terror merely because they have no money...

The Lyons government must be compelled to assist financially working-class refugees from fascist barbarism.⁴⁹

Although the Communist Party continued to argue against ‘mass immigration’, it characterised the arrival of these refugees as a ‘special problem’ that had been ‘created with the rise of fascism’.⁵⁰ The Party thus claimed that the Australian working class ‘can be nothing but sympathetic to the victims of fascist terror and anxious to assist in securing sanctuary for them’.⁵¹

The Party built a small cadre of migrant members amongst the Italian, Greek and Jewish communities, especially in Melbourne and Sydney, and became increasingly involved in mobilising the Jewish community towards anti-fascism and support for the war effort. Unlike the British and American Communist Parties,⁵² which had built significant Jewish membership in the 1930s due to their militant anti-fascism, the Australian party had to make significant concrete efforts to welcome Jewish members into the Party and combat anti-semitism amongst its members (and the wider labour movement). A 1943 document, intercepted by the security services, outlined the important responsibility of the Australian Communist Party in this field:

1. To mobilise the labour movement and people generally to understand the nature of anti-semitism, to stamp it out and expose the fascist plans of its purveyors.
2. To win the Jewish people for the National Front for active participation in the fight against fascism for all progressive activities of the Australian people and for active steps to combat anti-semitism [sic].
3. To support every step which has as its aim the saving of as many Jewish people as possible from Nazi controlled Europe, to fight for the reconstruction of Jewish life after the war with full rights for all Jews. To participate in carrying out these tasks is the special duty of all Jewish Communists irrespective of what their particular Party activity or responsibility may be, where they may work or amongst whom they may mix.⁵³

‘Australia’s Monroe Doctrine’: critiquing White Australia

By the war’s end, the Australian far left was in a buoyant mood – the Soviet Union was held in high esteem, European colonies around the world were declaring independence, and with some 23,000 members in 1944 and an ability to exert control over at least 40 per cent of Australia’s unions, the previously marginal CPA had become a force to be reckoned with.⁵⁴ At the height of this momentary euphoria, the Party’s Assistant Secretary Richard ‘Dick’ Dixon wrote a short pamphlet entitled *Immigration and the White Australia Policy*, which captured the Party’s partial awakening to the issues of race and migration – openly attacking the White Australia policy for the first time. Yet, Dixon’s pamphlet straddled a difficult course – challenging the labour movement’s long history of opposing

coloured immigration, while arguing to retain the wages and conditions that ‘white Australia’ maintained.

The pamphlet proposed a new position on migration for the Australian labour movement: one based on the recognition of Asia as a vital location for Australian diplomacy – as well as proud people struggling for independence – all while advocating a very low, non-discriminatory, level of immigration to Australia. The pamphlet sought to achieve this first by underplaying the level of racism present in the historic Australian labour movement, arguing that ‘The extent to which the working class movement has embraced “White Australia” is nothing more than an indication of the degree of employer class influence in the labor movement’.⁵⁵ Such apologism should not be surprising, as it was in line with the language of the Popular Front period, officially promulgated in 1934 by the Comintern, which saw the CPA reimagine itself as the inheritor of all of Australia’s radical tradition and mellowed its language towards the ALP. Dixon remarked of the 1938 sequi-centenary anniversary of Australian nationhood that ‘We are the real Australians... the inheritors of everything that is good and decent in the history of Australia’.⁵⁶ An article popularising the Party’s new stance, appearing in its national organ *Tribune*, sought to recast Australian history as one with immigration at its centre, with mention made of the Polish explorer Strzlecki and the multicultural Eureka Stockade, while the role of Asian workers in Australia in the struggle against Japan was highlighted.⁵⁷

In keeping with this new fondness for inclusive nationalism, Dixon also cast White Australia as an imperialist policy ‘of building Australia as a “British race” so that this country might stand as “trustees” for British, as well as Australian, interests in the Pacific’. In this way, it stood as ‘Australia’s “Monroe Doctrine” – its object the preservation of the British Australian nationality’. The White Australia policy was then constructed, not as a pact between labour and capital to each protect their respective gains, but as a conspiracy of bourgeois ideology and imperialist interest, with the CPA standing as defender of the working class and inheritor of Australian egalitarianism. White Australia, in Dixon’s approximation, was not a progressive leitmotif, but ‘an outrageous insult to our great allies in the people’s war against fascism – China, India and Indonesia – because it proclaims “white” superiority’ – and as such constituted a stymie to better regional relations.⁵⁸ Australian communists were furthering their connections with foreign parties in the 1930s and 1940s, and many members had Asian postings during the war. The Army newspaper, *Salt*, was a conduit for the opinions of many CPA members in the army, who having met with independence forces in Malaysia, India and elsewhere, felt that ‘In the interest of justice we owe [them] every assistance in their struggle’, as one recruit put it, concluding that ‘No lasting peace can be established so long as one subject people remains in the world’.⁵⁹ Another writer condemned the White Australia policy as a ‘closed door policy to particular races that fans the embers of war [and] fosters mistrust and widens the gap between countries’.⁶⁰

Such solidarity with Asian peoples, and opposition to discriminatory immigration policies, did not however mean that the party opposed the use of the Immigration

Act to limit migration. If anything, quite the opposite was true, as the party was a vocal opponent of the federal government's rhetoric of 'populate or perish'. The party's 1945 constitution makes no mention of its opposition to White Australia, instead only articulating a desire for 'an immigration policy adjusted to industrial conditions so that the living standard established by the long struggle of the labor movement will not be undermined'. The wording of this was even harsher than that adopted at the 1938 congress, which spoke of Australia's need to 'bear... a share in giving asylum to the refugees from fascist brutality', posing questions as to just how much of a shift had taken place.⁶¹ Dixon went to some effort in the pamphlet to argue that the 'White Australia' policy was not an economic policy designed to protect living standards – as the mainstream argument went – but a racist policy detrimental to Australia's interests. Rather than a racial system premised on British superiority, Dixon stated, 'the number of immigrants each year should be determined by the economic situation in Australia'. What this meant concretely was elucidated at the 1948 Party Conference, which supported 'a quota system of immigration, based on the country's capacity to absorb new migrants, a system that would not discriminate against potential migrants on grounds of colour, race or creed'.⁶² As such, the Party was able to express a somewhat contradictory position of solidarity with Asian peoples, while enforcing a policy that would ensure Australia was not 'overrun by Asiatics', as it was put. The Party's incongruous position was soon to be tested.

Good and bad refugees: opposing mass migration and contesting deportations

During World War II, Australia accepted some 6,000 wartime refugees from the Asia-Pacific region, 'who normally would have been refused admission', on what Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell termed 'compassionate grounds'.⁶³ These refugees, including many seamen moored in Australia harbours during the Japanese advance, were given refuge on the understanding, as Calwell put it, that 'these people would return to their own countries at the conclusion of hostilities'.⁶⁴ Drew Cottle has explained well the formation in the late 1930s of an alliance between left-wing Chinese-Australians and white Australians around the Sydney waterfront, particularly members of the Communist-dominated Seaman's Union of Australia (SUA). This alliance, allowed by the formation of a 'popular front' in China between Communist and Nationalist forces, saw children of leading Chinese-Australian merchants form a branch of the Koumintang's (KMT) Chinese Seaman's Union (CSU) in Sydney in 1942, despite none of them actually working on the waterfront. The CSU claimed membership of all the Chinese wartime refugees in Australia, and organised successful campaigns for improved hours and working conditions amongst stranded wartime seamen, particularly owing to a walk off by 500 sailors in Western Australia in 1942. CSU members also played significant roles in the struggle for Indonesian independence, helping to enforce a ban on Dutch shipping leaving Australian harbours instigated by Indonesian

seamen in 1947.⁶⁵ The Party’s close relationship with Chinese, as well as Malaysian and Indonesians working in Australia, saw them vocally defend these ‘enslaved peoples’ when the White Australia policy was utilised against them. In March 1945, the instance of eight mistreated Indian seamen who absconded from a Dutch vessel being turned away from Australia using ‘the notorious dictation test’ – a written examination employed against immigrants that could be undertaken in any European language – served as an early point of protest. While intended ‘as a protection for Australia against low living standards... The “White Australia” policy [is] being used to enforce the very slavery it was intended to prevent!’⁶⁶

The Party used similar language to attack the Immigration Minister, whom they dubbed “‘Concentration Camp” Calwell’, over his determination ‘to consolidate his position as the most unpopular statesman of the Eastern Hemisphere’ by deporting those recalcitrant wartime refugees who refused to follow his directives.⁶⁷ The party campaigned widely on the issue, offering the pages of *Tribune* to both leading figures in the CSU and the Australian wives of the proposed deportees, who set up their own group. Samuel Wong, a leading CSU member and former head of the Australian Kuomintang, wrote approvingly in a letter to the paper of the CPA’s quota policy, and warned that discrimination against these refugees, who had ‘rendered great service to Australia during the war’, would ‘cause... much resentment in Asia’.⁶⁸ The deportee’s Australian wives prepared a petition accusing Calwell of ‘having infringed the whole preamble of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights, and so many articles of that great world document as to make us wonder whether he had become a law unto himself’, concluding that ‘we fear Mr. Calwell as millions of the world’s people feared Hitler and Togo during the last decade’.⁶⁹ The CPA’s wide network – from trade unions to church and student groups – was utilised to pass motions and agitate on the deportees’ behalf.⁷⁰

The CPA’s propaganda in defence of Asian workers as proud trade unionists with war records on the allied side sat perhaps incongruously alongside their ‘prolonged and bitter campaign’ against migrants from areas of Eastern Europe under Soviet control, who presented as deserters and fascists.⁷¹ Commenting on the imminent deportation of a Malaysian serviceperson, *Tribune* lamented: ‘The British subject with the RSL badge on his coat lapel and the wound scars on his arm has to get out so that a Balt fascist can take his place.’⁷² This scolding of ‘Balts’ – racist shorthand for Displaced Persons of Eastern European descent – was a constant feature of the CPA’s reportage in the late 1940s, a sentiment seemingly in contradiction with the Party’s stated policy of non-discrimination that became a locus for the organisation’s anxiety of mass overseas migration driving down hard won living standards for white Australians. Stories in *Tribune* attacked ‘Balts’ as scabs and anti-union saboteurs willing to ‘work 48 hrs for 40 hrs pay’ who were ‘better cared for than Australians’.⁷³ The Labor government was accused of favouring these migrants owing to their strong anti-communism, a claim borne out by subsequent research.⁷⁴ At a time of great housing shortage, where many Australians were living in ‘humpies and tents...labour and materials needed to build homes for Australians

have been diverted to build Balt camps', *Tribune* protested.⁷⁵ Communist controlled unions black-banned work on so called 'Balt hostels', and championed industrial action to stop persons from Eastern Europe working in communist-dominated industries such as mining.⁷⁶ The Party went so far as to accuse 'Pro-Nazi Balts with cameras' of surveilling Australian defence bases, and the recently constructed Woomera rocket range.⁷⁷

Such fears of being swamped by anti-communist migrants ensured that, by late 1949, the Party had reversed its previous position of quotas, instead favouring a 'halt to immigration... until housing is available for those persons already in Australia'.⁷⁸ Such a stance is a logical outcome of the CPA's policy, that while highly advocating a non-discriminatory border policy, placed an individual's right to a better life well behind the collective rights of Australians to decent wages and conditions. During the 1950s, the CPA continued to highlight the impropriety of government deportations, including against Chinese workers it claimed were smuggled into the country as 'slave labour'. Exceptions under the Immigration Act allowed Chinese-Australian merchants to sponsor labourers from Hong Kong or Taiwan, whereupon 'slavery conditions are being imposed' and 'Chinese workers who revolt or merely complain are threatened with the sack and ultimate deportation'. Such scams, which saw Chinese workers paid 'only \$2 a week', were not only an affront to these workers' rights to be paid and join trade unions, but 'a threat to Australian working and living standards'.⁷⁹ The far left's focus on ensuring a non-discriminatory, if highly regulated, migration system aimed to align with the economic needs of Australia was soon challenged by a new crop of young activists.

An 'immoral policy'?: Communism and White Australia in the 1960s

As the 1960s dawned, the Immigration Reform Group (IRG) published a pamphlet entitled *Immigration: Control or Colour Bar?* Selling out its initial print run of 8,190 in a matter of weeks, the pamphlet's authors – academics and students from universities in Melbourne and Sydney – adopted a very different tone to previous leftist critics of White Australia.⁸⁰ It was an 'immoral' policy, they wrote, that 'lump[s] together diverse individuals because of a single common quality', one which 'in the modern world, is becoming less and less indicative of the possession of any other quality'.⁸¹ They, however, went beyond the Communist Party's argument that such a policy merely damaged Australia's diplomatic relations in Asia, or as an insult to proud nationalist peoples who the Party sympathised with. As the IRG put it, 'it is not enough to hear about misery in Asia and the efforts to end it', instead it was 'important to know Asians at first hand and to help them at first hand by including them, as far as practicable, amongst the beneficiaries of our migration program'.⁸² Such conceptions of the importance of contact – of experience – both presaged the global New Left's emerging discourse of authenticity, and harkened back to many of the author's involvement in groups like the Volunteer Graduate Scheme (VGS). As Kate Darian-Smith and James Waghorne have recently written, IRG's positions 'owed less to politics and more to... personal

contact between Australians with Asian students' who often lived in 'suspicion of [the] racial prejudice which our immigration policy evokes'.⁸³ Equally, many had served in Indonesia under the VGS programme, a Colombo Plan initiative where Australian students would work alongside Indonesians on development projects, refusing wages above those of a local worker.⁸⁴ The IRG saw reform to immigration laws as part of a broader suite of changes Australia needed to undergo to become a part of the Asian region, as 'to drop the White Australia Policy merely because of the effect on Asian and African opinion is to take too narrow a view of what is at stake'.⁸⁵ And while personal contacts had been important for members of the Australian far left, the IRG's mode of activism strayed far from the CPA's line of the early 1960s.

The CPA continued to oppose White Australia in the 1960s in much the same language as it had in the past. While the Party's newspaper makes no mention of the IRG's activities, it covered significant conflicts at Menzies' yearly Australian Citizenship Convention and various protests by Asian and African nations at international forums. At the 1959 Convention, academics, scientists and religious leaders were reported as condemning what was viewed as the continued prevalence of false genetic readings of race, and supporting an admission system of Asians 'by quota', which was both IRG and CPA policy. The article concluded that it was 'regrettable' that the head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions was quoted at the same time 'as supporting White Australia'.⁸⁶ After the Sharpeville Massacre, as Jennifer Clark has argued, Menzies stood out as South Africa's only friend in the Commonwealth, and the Party relished in reporting the 'highly embarrassing' questioning and attacks from newly decolonised states.⁸⁷ Against this backdrop of growing criticism, the Party continued to campaign for an end to the mass migration programme until housing and jobs could be guaranteed for all, while taking up the cause of Italian and Greek migrants who protested in the Bonegilla migrant camp, and opposed the deportation of unwanted migrants from Portugal and Malaysia. Protests in 1961 by migrants and Bonegilla about poor camp conditions and lack of work opportunities were presented as a 'blow... against the dishonest and callous "mass migration" policy'.⁸⁸ ASIO were particularly concerned about the relationship between the CPA and the migrant communities from southern Europe, especially those from Italy, Greece and Cyprus, where there was a tradition of large Communist Party and militant trade union membership.⁸⁹ Douglas Jordan wrote that while 'a positive approach towards these migrants was not always uniform or consistent...', it was in general a continuation of the internationalist outlook' of the CPA.⁹⁰

Cases of racially motivated deportations proved equally powerful ammunition. Two particular cases, of Malayan pearl divers in Darwin who had been residents of Australia for over a decade, and of a British-Ceylonese seaman who absconded from his ship in Perth, claiming abuse by his captain, were presented as evidence that White Australia was a notion foreign to Australians. Darwin's citizens were reported as signing a petition 'almost unanimously' and some 500 attended a protest meeting to ensure the Malaysians, who had 'many friendships' and were

‘thoroughly integrated into local life’, be allowed to stay.⁹¹ The case of Thomas Palmer, a 25-year-old shipping engineer threatened with deportation because he ‘doesn’t look European’, proved another example of a discredited, unpopular policy. The CPA used its party, trade union and women’s section to send letters to the Department of Immigration, with the Union of Australian Women pointing this case out as an example of the ‘sinister side to the supposedly innocent “White Australia Policy”’.⁹² Again, public sympathy for the deportee was central to the Party’s reportage, with *Tribune* reporting that ‘Public opinion in WA has shown itself overwhelmingly against the White Australia policy’. It was reported that the 12 letters Perth’s *Daily Mail* received regarding the matter ‘unanimously condemned the Palmer decision’, demonstrating that ‘Returned Servicemen’s League leaders and many Labor and Liberal politicians, who are so vocal in their support for the “White Australia” policy, are out of step with democratic opinion in Australia’.⁹³ An excerpt from a new book by leftist historian Russel Ward, published in 1962, made this point even clearer, labelling the policy ‘an un-Australian import’. On the point of the policy’s unpopularity the IRG and the CPA were in accordance: this was a policy whose time had passed.⁹⁴ It would not be, however, until 1965 that ‘White Australia’ would be removed from the ALP programme, ‘undermining over 60 years of bipartisanship’ on the issue, and presaging the policy’s dilution in 1966 by the Holt Government, and final removal in 1973.⁹⁵ Yet, the policy’s effects lingered.

‘So-called refugees’: Vietnamese boat people and the left in the 1970s

‘White Australia’, John Lack and Jacqueline Templeton argue, ‘fell with Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975’.⁹⁶ Large numbers of Asian immigrants only began arriving in the late 1970s, with thousands fleeing the new regime in Saigon for what they hoped to be friendly shores. This fall was, initially at least, met with hostility from the political left. The far left had turned to Asia significantly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, motivated largely by the Vietnam War and the Chinese Cultural Revolution – two examples of a proud, revolutionary, and distant struggle. Students, claiming to be ‘fight[ing] behind the lines’ for Vietnamese revolutionaries, and many activists undertook revolutionary pilgrimages to Asian revolutionary hotspots, returning with stories of self-sacrificing youth so different to their apathetic Australian counterparts. Yet, solidarity activism could often in fact marginalise Asian voices, many of whom were present on the campuses that members of the growing far left attended. Intellectual and women’s activist Anne Summers remembers watching an anti-war rally march past her university office, thinking that ‘the fate of the Third World was being determined, or so it seemed, on the streets outside’, while an Asian student interviewed many years later recalled his distance from anti-war students: ‘I [didn’t] go out to the pub with them that often’.⁹⁷ And, while Australians students protested alongside their Malaysian counterparts – who made up some 60

per cent of Asians students in Australia – to challenge repression in their homelands, the arrival of Vietnamese refugees from the Communist takeover received a very different reception.⁹⁸

The imminent fall of Saigon was welcomed in *Tribune* with the banner headline reading 'Peace Near' – and a warning – that a 'cynical propaganda campaign' was being used in Australia to tarnish this victory by reporting on 'refugees fleeing the communists'. 'Refugees', *Tribune* warned, who were 'the wealthy, the corrupt and the collaborators' – not genuine people in need, like those fleeing fascist Chile or Spain.⁹⁹ The far left consciously politicised the arrival of so-called 'boat people' from Vietnam, relying on rhetorical tools of White Australia to draw distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' arrivals. Some of this was reminiscent of the 1940s discourse around 'Balts' as favoured immigrants, with one article entitled 'The Great Humanitarian Refugee Con: Only Reactionaries Need Apply' leaving little to the imagination. Chilean refugees, suffering under a 'bloody right-wing coup', were only allowed into Australia in small numbers, and 'after extensive delays and an undertaking not to engage in political activity'. On the other hand, refugees from South Vietnam were said to receive 'a warm welcome' amid 'paroxysms of anti-communist hysteria' from the press. *Tribune* warned that these refugees were already being used as indentured labour at a time of high unemployment, and could even be 'expatriate terrorists determined to sabotage' the new government.¹⁰⁰ Another article resorted to similarly ugly language, describing Vietnamese refugee arrivals as 'amongst the wealthiest this country has seen', bringing 'not only large quantities of gold, but servants as well'. One family was said to have bought a comfortable Perth home within a week of arriving, while others were 'making handsome profits from the sale of their supposedly unseaworthy boats' – all of which was 'a far cry from descriptions in the press of poor and hapless Vietnamese washing up on the north-west coast'.¹⁰¹ Whether intentional or not, *Tribune* was employing a language of racial exclusion with a long history in the Australian labour movement.

Such racially charged language was also evident in the Australian Labor Party – with minister Clyde Cameron reporting that Whitlam responded to the fall of Saigon that he did not want 'hundreds of f—ing Vietnamese Balts coming into this country'.¹⁰² Whitlam spoke along similar – if more restrained – lines at a gathering of the Australia-Vietnam Society, a CPA sponsored solidarity group charged with raising funds for reconstruction and spreading reports of the struggling nation's successes, in late 1978. 'So-called' refugees, who Whitlam remarked were offering handsome bribes to local officials in order to leave, were 'creating social tensions among the Australian people'.¹⁰³ 'Most of Australia is uninhabitable', Whitlam later added, 'and the refugees from Vietnam will be coming to Australia to live overwhelmingly in Sydney and Melbourne, which are also quite crowded', casting the perceived threat of over-population in highly racial terms.¹⁰⁴ The return of such rhetoric – even from avowed opponents of racialized restrictions – demonstrates the left's continuing ambiguity.

Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century Australia's labour movement was arguably amongst the world's most privileged, owing to its support for a regime of immigration restriction targeting coloured peoples. As this chapter has shown, the Australian far left was not immune from such racism, and indeed in its desire to provide leadership to the labour movement, justified policies far from the spirit of proletarian internationalism. While the IWW provided noble opposition in the 1910s, the CPA was throughout its existence torn between a professed global solidarity and the realities of the Australia's position as a bastion of white skin privilege. The Comintern criticised the CPA for this, and an uneasy compromise was made whereby the party extended a 'friendly hand' to migrant workers in Australia, but campaigned against 'mass immigration' from Europe at the same time.

After World War II, the party began calling out the White Australia Policy as un-Australian, imperialistic and racist – an insult to struggling peoples in Asia – all the while singling out groups of migrants for vilification and maintaining a policy of either no or very little immigration in order to maintain Australian worker's high standards of living. In the end, it was neither the CPA's ambiguity nor the IRG's morality but instead geopolitical expediency which drove the policy's 'long, slow death'.¹⁰⁵ Today, it is easy to question whether rumours of the policy's death were indeed overstated. Much as Vietnamese refugees were targets of far left campaigns in the 1970s, the contemporary left is prone to bouts of nationalistic bordering – with the ALP a continuing proponent of offshore detention of asylum seekers, and trade unions opposing the use of temporary visas to employ foreign workers on an 'Australians first' basis. The continuation of such rhetoric, even from a party which officially abandoned the policy over 50 years ago and trade unions who hold strong to their supposedly internationalist traditions, illustrates White Australia's long, lingering shadow over this nation's progressive politics.

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