

The ANZACs Fought for a White Australia

Our dear ancestors, the rank and file Australian infantry who gallantly fought for our nation in conflicts across the world were overwhelmingly united in their express advocacy for the continuation and defence of the White Australia Policy.

Starting with the first world war, Australia committed its troops to the fields of Europe in order to defend the dominance of the British empire, under whose fleet the young Australian commonwealth was shielded from its nearby Asian neighbours, as noted:



“If England were to go down, the result would be disastrous to the Anglo-Celtic-Saxon race all the world over... we should be rendered helpless against one of the greatest fighting nations the world has ever known. I shall never utter a word derogatory of the Japanese as a nation ... [but] what could we do unaided against such a nation?” – William Mahoney, Member of Parliament, 1912

“I bid you go and fight for White Australia in France” – William M. Hughes, Prime Minister, 1916

“Since this war has passed like a scourge over mankind all those except the deliberately blind will realise that liberty is a thing precious beyond price. It has been bought with the blood of 60,000 young Australians. It was by the suffering, privations and the heroisms of the men who went out to fight that we gained a free, a safe and a White Australia.” – W. M. Hughes, Prime Minister¹

One early resolution from the Western Australian branch of the RSL in 1919, which was analogous to the views of the other leagues across the nation², insisted upon continued Federal Government vigilance over prospective immigrants, insisting that those soldiers who had been killed in World War One had forfeited their lives to keep Australia white. The motion insisted on ‘the retention of the “White Australia” Policy’ and ‘emphatically’ protested:

*“[The RSL is] against any suggested amendments of our Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act so vitally necessary for the future welfare of Australia. Remembering that over fifty thousand of our comrades have voluntarily made the supreme sacrifice for their country’s liberty and race purity.”*³

Mr. G. W. Holland, Victorian state president of the Returned Services League of Australia held a remarkable meeting at Anzac house in Melbourne in July 1933; Met by significant applause and cheering he said to the audience. *“Australia should remain for all time the purest British country in the world, a “White Australia” is one of the planks of our league’s platform.”*⁴

¹ W. M. Hughes, A Tribute to Australian Valour, 1919, pg 10

² Gregson, “Australia’s Picked Citizens’: the RSL in the interwar years’ - https://ausnatives.org/nativewiki/index.php/The_RSL_between_the_wars

³ Letter, Western Australian branch of the RSL to Acting PM, dated 12 March 1919, NAA: A1/15, 1919/4097

⁴ 1933 'A "WHITE AUSTRALIA."', The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954), 20 July, p. 10.



General Ryrie fought in Gallipoli, where he was wounded twice – he proceeded to join the battle in the Sinai and Palestine campaign. He was involved in the famous charge of the light horse at the third battle of Gaza in which Australian forces captured Beersheba. 1919 saw General Ryrie placed in charge of the whole Australian Imperial Force. Ryrie noted in his time in Federal Parliament “At all hazards, we ought to preserve our ideal of a White Australia – **even if we have to fight and die for that ideal** – unless we are content to disappear.”⁵

Australia had another heroic, almost mythical character come from our shores. Colonel Burford Sampson, the native to Launceston, Tasmania who went off to fight for Australia in the Boer war, staying behind in Rhodesia in their mountain force – returning to Australia to join the Australian Army and fight in Gallipoli and the Western Front – commanding both the 12th and the 15th Battalion in his time in leadership. Colonel Sampson, who later went to the senate said fervently “White Australia is not a mere policy as far as Australia is concerned: **It is a religion.**”⁶



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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15th Battalion Rugby Team, Colonel Sampson in the middle (bottom row)

The Herald recalls that in 1928, along with the proposal for the leadership of Sir John Monash, the **Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League declared that all branches will support the integrity and maintenance of a ‘White Australia’** too did they advance “An adequate defence force, a vigorous immigration system with necessary safeguards to ensure suitable

⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansard, Wednesday, 6 September 1911, Page: 141

⁶ 1928 'A WHITE AUSTRALIA', Sunday Times (Perth, WA : 1902 - 1954), 30 September, p. 1. (First Section)

migrants being obtained, unification of railway gauges, nationalisation of main roads, systematic immigration of industries, reforestation, public health and trade within the empire.⁷

Sir John Monash too, the famed war-time general noted his support of the White Australia Policy in 1925 arguing that “*Canada and South Africa stand absolutely with Australia in the assertion of the right of a modern democracy to determine the composition of its population as being essential to real self-government.*” And that “*Capable representatives [at the league of nations] can do the greatest service to Australia by making known the real ideals of the Australian people upon such a matter as a White Australia Policy*”⁸



Toowoomba, Queensland, 1950 saw the Returned Servicemen’s League declare before the Nation that **“The White Australia Policy must be kept inviolate and the Returned Service League must not allow ANY “watering down” of its attitude.”** The League’s South-Eastern District president C. H. Harburg said:

“Australia was a white country and we must keep it White. Thousands of slaves had been allowed to remain in the United States after the abolition of slavery and the United States is now faced with grave racial problems which we do not want. We do not want slum areas like Harlem, New York here in Australia.

The Returned Service League has subscribed to the White Australia Policy for more than 30 years and must take strong exception to those sections of the community who from time-to-time attacked the policy.”

Mr N. L. Williams of the Returned Service League (North Queensland) said at this same conference: “We do not want to suggest to coloured peoples that Australia held them in disregard, but we want to tell them quite forcibly that **we want to run our own country and keep our own manner of living.**”⁹

1952 saw Mr I. Cameron stand before the 37th annual state Congress of the R.S.S.A.I.L.A which opened in the Brisbane Memorial Hall declaring that **“We should stick hard and fast to the White Australia policy and let the whole world know it.** Not one Asiatic country would ever be our ally”¹⁰

In 1963, the Northern Territory attempted to lobby for a change to the White Australia Policy, to which the RSL national secretary A. Keys noted “There is no reason to depart from [the White Australia Policy] by this means or any other – **Support for the present immigration policy had been reaffirmed at a number of national R.S.L congresses.**”¹¹

As late as 1981 the RSL called for the White Australia Policy to be practiced, noting that “*These are views which are felt widely throughout the community and must be accepted as the valid expression of feeling by genuine Australians:*” and that *Immigration policy should “take steps to increase percentage-wise the Australian (in particular) and United Kingdom, Irish and Caucasian-born content of the Australian population.”*¹²

⁷ 1928 'SIR JOHN MONASH AS SOLDIERS' LEADER', The Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954), 27 November, p. 8.

⁸ 1925 'Can We Rely on Britain?', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld. : 1872 - 1947), 20 June, p. 7.

⁹ 1950 'Diggers say stay "white"', *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane, Qld. : 1926 - 1954), 11 June, p. 3

¹⁰ 1952 '"WHITE AUSTRALIA" POLICY ADVOCATED', *The Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette* (Qld. : 1922 - 1965), 7 June, p. 1.

¹¹ 1963 'Ministers Silent On Asian Migration Plea', *The Canberra Times* (ACT : 1926 - 1995), 27 August, p. 4

¹² 1981 'RSL official defends call for more whites', *The Canberra Times* (ACT : 1926 - 1995), 4 July, p. 7

This is by no means a comprehensive resource, but it is a first high level review of the consensus view of leading Australian military-men.

The Australian Soldiers were clear, right until the end of the policy that White Australia is the chief aim and desire of the Australian nation and the men who spilled their blood to defend it.