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White Australia article

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"WHITE AUSTRALIA" ARTICLE.

BY DON DUNSTAN.

The American scholar Dr. H.I. London in his book "Non-White Immigration and the White Australia Policy" tells the story of the Australian diplomat at a dinner with a South East Asian leader trying to explain Australia's immigration policy to a very critical host. Towards the end of the evening the wife of one of the guests turned to the diplomat's wife and said: "Well now both of us are part of the Asian family....". The diplomat's wife replied indignantly: "I will have you know we are British. We belong to a much superior race".

It would be funny if it was not so embarrassingly pathetic and if it did not illustrate so perfectly an attitude and a policy which have for too long embittered our economic and political relations with many of those countries which are most important to us. This same policy has also deprived us of some of the skills and talent we most urgently require for national development.

I have campaigned for a change in migration policy for more than a decade because I believe our present policy of racial discrimination, whether overtly displayed as "white Australia" or masked in bureaucratic cant as in more recent years is a major deterrent to an effective foreign policy and an affront to Australian ideals. It is, I believe, insupportable for compelling moral, economic, and political reasons and there are significant gains to be made from an open repudiation of it, gains which will not be made by piecemeal, almost stealthy, tinkering.

In that time there has been a marked shift in public opinion and the arguments for reform have become well known and have won a wide measure of acceptance in the community while the counter-arguments have been just as frequently aired and repudiated. A non-racial policy of balanced, controlled intake has moved from being a reformers' goal to a policy whose time has come.

I take pride in having been able to have played some part in this, particularly in successfully moving at the 1965 Federal Australian Labor Party conference the resolution which deleted the words "white Australia" from the platform, a change that was not a token gesture but which indicated a distinct change in party policy:

However, there are still a number of myths and misconceptions about what is implied by such a policy, some of them deliberately fostered by diehard opponents of change and I welcome this opportunity to review the reasons which led me to advocate change and to examine what would - and would not - stem from it.

Perhaps the most important is the effect that ethnically discriminatory migration has had on our foreign relations. Australia with its geopolitical and geo-economic place in the modern world simply cannot afford to be lumped with South Africa as one of the most strongholds of racism. And this is precisely the effect our migration policies have had. It was no accident that led a Filipino journalist to describe this policy as "a form of anticipatory apartheid". The world-wide revolt and revulsion against racism and colonialism by an ever growing number of people has been one of the most profound political phenomena of the past 30 years and it is one which we ignore at our peril. Australia, geographically close to and deeply involved with, the new countries of Asia and anxious to establish more friendly ties with them, can least of all afford the taint of racialism.

Australian conservatives are fond of maintaining that too much is made of this, that Asian and African countries understand and sympathise with the Australian position, accept that nation states have an inherent right to determine their demographic complexion and that, besides, they themselves are highly selective or downright exclusive. Those pressing such a view approvingly cite a remark by the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman,

that immigration policy was a domestic matter for Australia. The Tunku was, and is, a notably diplomatic and astute politician with a keen appreciation of the value of a well turned, and domestically harmless, phrase. Other Asians are less sympathetic and less diplomatic. During recent visits to Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan I had lengthy discussions with senior government and business leaders. In every case white Australia was introduced by them at some part in the conversation. Other Australian politicians and businessmen I have spoken with report similar experiences. It is a policy which has left a legacy of suspicions among Asians towards Australia and which continues to rankle and insult them. It is no exaggeration to say that most of them regard it as not only offensive but completely hypocritical. Numbers of them have pointed out, some sorrowfully some angrily, that we are prepared to fight in Asian countries to defend what are conceived to be our national interests but are then unwilling to admit to Australia the very Malaysians and Vietnamese to whose defence we rushed.

True most Asian and African countries at the official level are motivated by the desire to preserve diplomatic relations and refrain from open criticism of our migration policies. But to assume from this that these policies are accepted and understood is to display a blindness to reality besides which the ostrich appears a model of keen perception.

Among the realities it ignores is that one of these countries, Japan, is the third most productive in the world, has a gross national product of more than \$200 billion, produces one sixth of the world's steel and half its ships, has average wages above those of France, is well on the way to becoming a super-power and is of major, and still growing, importance to the Australian economy. It is difficult to persuade the, admittedly non-Christian and non-English speaking, Japanese that our immigration policies are not discriminatory against and insulting to them when we

erect stringent barriers against their entry and then actively encourage the arrival of non-christian, non-English speaking Turks.

Illogicalities abound once one begins to try to defend the present system, even in its slightly relaxed form. Defenders of the status quo argue that other states maintain restrictive migration policies but conveniently ignore the fact that they are not countries, as Australia is, which are wooing newcomers. They maintain we need to ensure that Australia is homogeneous but through some metaphysical miracle of definition manage to include non-English speaking Greeks but exclude Anglicised Indians, welcome non-christian Turks but cold-shoulder christian Filipinos, admit poor southern Italians but refuse wealthy Hong Kong merchants. It is argued that recruitment of Asian migrants would drain underdeveloped countries of badly needed brainpower, an argument which ignores the fact that many highly-qualified Chinese Malaysians are unable to find at home any other than clerical jobs. Equally it is maintained that newcomers must be capable of ready assimilation but no explanation is offered why this should be harder for an Asian professional man than a Yugoslav and it rather ignores the more than adequate job of integration done by our native-born Chinese minority, exemplified in the election of the late Harry Chan as Mayor of Darwin.

Despite the best endeavours of the Canberra apologists and the existence of an Asian migration quota (by definition discriminatory) the non-white onlooker can be forgiven for assuming that the principal requirement for admission to Australian shores is to be demonstrably Caucasian and that homogeneity is to be equated with whiteness.

There have been recent rumblings that the Japanese are looking with less and less favour on our present policy and could well be the herald of future discontents.

The emerging generation of business and political leaders in the countries of Asia and Africa are likely to be far less tolerant of Australian shortcomings than their predecessors. I am not suggesting that we should permit our policies to be dictated from abroad but continuation of a racially exclusive immigration programme in this swelling climate of opinion at a time when we are seeking a greater regional role and courting investment and trade there can only have a damaging effect. We should revise our policy now when we would gain much kudos from doing so rather than doing so later when it may appear that we are yielding to pressure unwillingly.

Considerations of real politik aside, I believe a racially discriminatory policy to be inconsistent with Australian ideals and aspirations. We cannot follow one and at the same time profess belief in the equality of man and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. We cannot maintain a belief in christian ideals if we pick and choose who shall be Australian on a basis of skin pigmentation. Whatever justification there may have been for such an approach at the time of Federation there can be none in the circumstances of the seventies.

The sensible alternative is a programme of planned, selective, balanced migration designed to achieve the welfare and integration of all citizens, the preservation of democracy and balanced development, avoidance of difficult social and economic problems resulting from unplanned migration, clearly and demonstrably non-restrictive in any ethnic sense. If this was done Australian life would be enriched, national development would be fostered and our standing abroad would be very considerably enhanced. There is nothing impractical or idealistic in such a policy. It is quite consistent with what has been achieved elsewhere, notably in Canada, with no disruptive social consequences but in the past suggestions along these lines have brought a violent and hostile reaction from a highly vocal minority

in the community whose feelings tend to be guided by prejudice and fear and who are susceptible to the views of those people willing to play on such fears. The fact that their concern is often based on myth does not make it any the less real but it does mean it can be dispelled by an examination of the evidence if the facts are properly put before them.

One of the most frequent misconceptions is that migration policy reform means the metaphorical floodgates will be opened and a yellow human tide will flood in. This is nonsense. No-one in Australia, is suggesting that we should permit uncontrolled migration. I certainly do not. Any liberalised policy would still exercise tight governmental control over the numbers to be admitted in any one period and be related to continuing research into our capacity to absorb them. It is clear there is a finite number to our migrant intake just as there is a limit to the total population Australia can support. On the basis of existing technology this latter is probably somewhere around the 25 million mark.

The assumption that hordes of Asians were poised ready to head southwards was part of the received belief that led to the original introduction of white Australia. There is no evidence to support it. They did not do so before European settlement, though the country was known to them, and, if it really was the case, the existence or otherwise of official sanctions would make little difference to a horde.

Probably the most understandable argument used by those who oppose relaxation of present controls is that, unless we do have them, we shall see in Australia a repetition of the race riots of Watts and Notting Hill and the formation of coloured ghettos and all their attendant problems. It is an understandable argument because it would be, if likely, an appalling prospect but I believe it is based on wrong premises.

Australians have demonstrated in the way they have accepted thousands of Colombo Plan Asian students and in the way we treat our own native ethnic Asian minorities that there is a high level of national tolerance and absence of colour bar feeling. This has been further evidenced by experience in integrating the non-European arrivals since the partial relaxation of racial barriers in 1966. More important social strife of the kind that culminates in the formation of ghettos and eruption of race riots results not from the existence of a multi-racial society per se but from the exploitation of one group by another. The exploited are generally the minority - though not necessarily as the South African situation shows - and the exploiters the majority. Provided the same attention was given to the assimilation of non-European migrants as has been given to newcomers from European countries - and again no-one suggests that this would not be the base - there is small likelihood of importing conflict.

Another frequently heard fear, closely related to the homogeneity argument, is that the national consciousness or Australian way of life would suffer grave and permanent damage in the face of invasion by alien cultures. This not only assumes an unlikely degree of antipodean cultural fragility and gives a notably low rating to the descendants of Confucius and Buddha but it is highly complacent in its belief that the Adelaide or Sydney way is the only way. It also ignores the fact that European migrants tend to become Australian at a considerably faster rate than Australians adopt mediterranean mores. It is far more likely that the Australian ethos, marked as it is by a conformist, aggressive dynamism, would gain more from exposure to the cultures, contacts and traditions which the newcomers would bring with them than it would lose just as the benefits from the influx of Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and other post-war migrant waves have been along a two-way street.

An extension of the same argument suggests that numbers of non-European migrants would form a pool of cheap labour and drive down wages and that, because of their origins in countries often under authoritarian rule, would find it hard to adjust to our system of parliamentary representative government. No convincing arguments have been brought forward to suggest that a balanced, controlled intake along the lines I have suggested could not be efficiently absorbed into our existing award and arbitration structure and it is significant that some of the most pressing advocates of reform have come from the trade unions. Equally it cannot seriously be maintained that Indians, Singaporeans or Malaysians would find more difficulty in accepting the tenets of Westminster-style Government than have Russian or Czechoslovak arrivals.

The last "unpopular" fear is that of miscegenation between Europeans and Asians. My personal belief is that people have an absolute right to marry whomsoever they please but one does not even need to accept this to perceive that such concerns are exaggerated. Firstly a migration programme geared to attracting people with particular skills rather than a particular pigmentation is likely to bring more married than unmarried migrants. Secondly Asians and other races have at least as high a sense of what Bishop J.S. Moyes called "social self-respect" as European groups and are as frequently not anxious, or even unwilling, to intermarry with people of another race.

The question of race still clouds debates on migration in Australia at a time when policies in this area require a complete re-examination. We need to study the kind of people we should be seeking, the cost to the community in bringing them here, the numbers we should aim for in an atmosphere of detached, rational inquiry not one confused by obsolete and irrelevant slogans about race. The white Australia policy was born in the last century of fear of being swamped by Chinese arrivals heading for the goldfields and of being

inundated with cheap indentured labour in Queensland and has been perpetuated by prejudice since then. Despite concessions to international opinion in the sixties it is still something of a sacred cow and still bedevils our commercial and foreign policies as well as depriving us of some of the technical skills we need most - such as university teaching staff.

In some ways the decision is likely to be made for us. Not only are pressures from without for change likely to increase significantly in the coming years, our traditional sources of intake are disappearing as the European countries become more prosperous and labour-hungry and we face increasing competition from those available from countries such as Canada. It is time for a change. That change should finally remove the stigma of racism and should be sufficiently dramatic to impress our neighbours that it is a change of heart as well as of emphasis.

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