Immigration: Australia’s changing face
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LEARNING AREAS: History
EDUCATION LEVEL: 7 -12

Since 1788 people have flocked to Australia from both near and far. We have a rich history of immigration, made all the more interesting by the controversial government policies towards migrants over the years. From the White Australia Policy to the “Pacific Solution” we explore the ways in which the changing government policies toward immigration have shaped our country.

What is immigration? Essentially it is the movement of people from one country or region, to another. As Australia was established as a British colony all of the residents of Australia today are descended from migrants, except for Aboriginal Australians. The reason that Australia has been so enormously affected by immigration is due to the large-scale immigration policy undertaken after the Second World War. Australia believed it had to “populate or perish” amid the apparent threat of communism and more practically, the growing demand for labour in the rapidly booming economy.

How has immigration shaped Australia?
When the Second World War ended in 1945 Australia actively sought immigrants so that we could increase our population, this period saw huge numbers of people come to Australia from all over the world. “Since 1945, almost 5.5 million people have come to Australia from 170 countries... The largest source of all settlers has been the United Kingdom and Ireland; New Zealand has been the second largest source country.”

The large number of migrants who have come to Australia since the 1940’s has had a huge impact on Australian society, in fact: “it really has been the defining characteristic of Australian society,” states Jock Collins, Professor of Economics at University of Technology Sydney and author of the book, Migrant Hands in a Distant Land. This means that more than four out of ten Australians today – approximately six million people – are direct products of post-war immigration.

The White Australia Policy
From the time of federation in 1901 until the 1970s Australia actively discouraged the migration of people that they considered undesirable, this policy is widely known as the White Australia Policy.
Undesirable people included “coloured” people, as well as prostitutes, criminals, the insane and any person suffering from a contagious disease.⁴

The White Australia Policy was very effective at keeping out “undesirable” migrants as it was general knowledge that anyone applying for residency would be required to take a dictation test upon arrival. The test could be given in any language determined by the immigration official and unwanted immigrants could be given the test in a language with which they were not familiar, ensuring their failure.

The number of settlers arriving in Australia between July 2001 and June 2002 totalled 88 900. They came from more than 150 countries. Most were born in New Zealand (17.6 per cent), the United Kingdom (9.8 per cent), China (7.5 per cent), South Africa (6.4 per cent), India (5.7 per cent) and Indonesia (4.7 per cent).

(Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs fact sheet: www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/pdf/02key.pdf)

Assisted Passages Scheme
As mentioned above, the period after the Second World War saw the Australian government actively seek out people to migrate to Australia. During this time Arthur Calwell was appointed as the first Minister for Immigration. The Government wanted “desirable” immigrants so much they began to give them money to come here. This was known as the Assisted Passages Scheme and it meant that the Government paid either all or part of the costs of migrating to Australia.

Between 1958 and 1972 assistance was given to 77.6 per cent of United Kingdom and 75.7 per cent of Irish migrants. “Essentially, assisted passages were a form of social engineering designed to keep Australia British, to increase the manual labour force, to redress the gender imbalance and to keep Australia white.”⁵

Revising White Australia 1950-1970
In 1958 the federal Government revised the Migration Act. It was very similar to the first, however it took out all direct mention of race and abolished the dictation test. Despite these changes the ideology of the White Australia Policy was still very much in place.

The White Australia Policy was very impractical. From the early days of post-war immigration it
became clear that Australia would not be able to fill its quota if it limited immigration to only British migrants. As time went on the “immigration net” was widened to include Northern Europe, Southern Europe, the Middle East and finally in the 1980s Indo-China provided the largest number of immigrants.6

The White Australia Policy was officially abolished by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972 and, after that, the Liberal Government, led by Malcom Fraser, worked to introduce many of the programs and services that helped to shape Australia as a “multicultural” society from that time onwards.7

**Business migrants and recession 1970-1990**

From the 1970’s to the 1980’s, while the race of migrants no longer mattered as much, there was a strong emphasis placed on admitting people “...with the expertise and capital to establish worthwhile enterprises in Australia.”8

From the late 1980’s to the mid 1990’s Australia experienced a very bad recession and there was pressure on the Government to cut immigration numbers, as it was feared that migrants would take jobs from Australians. The Government did not cut back in the way that many people wanted and there was a great deal of backlash.9

**Today’s refugee crisis**

In more recent years the Howard Government has reduced the commitment to multiculturalism. They have closed Government agencies and privatised migrant services such as English language services. The Government has also taken an extremely harsh stance towards refugees, implementing the “Pacific Solution” which redefined Australia’s maritime borders in order to send a message to people smugglers. Today, refugees, including women and children can spend up to three years in detention centres awaiting the process of their visa applications. Many of them spend time incarcerated only to be sent back to the country from which they fled.

**What is multiculturalism?**

“Multiculturalism recognises the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian society and actively pursues equality of opportunity for all Australians to participate in the life of the nation and the right to maintain ethnic and cultural heritages within the law and the political framework.”10 Put simply this means that we recognise the cultures of all migrants and actively support them in maintaining their culture and we also assist them in settling in Australia through programs such as English language classes.

**What sort of migration program do we have today?**

Today there are two programs in Australia aimed at assisting people to migrate to Australia. There is the “Migration Program” and the “Humanitarian Program.” The humanitarian program is for refugees or anyone else seeking safety in Australia. There are around 12,000 places set aside under the humanitarian program. The migration program covers all other people who are interested in migrating
to Australia. There are several different categories under which potential migrants can apply for an Australian visa under the migration program, these are:

- Skilled migrants - people who have particular occupation skills, outstanding talents or business skills;
- Family sponsored migrants – those who are sponsored by a relative who is an Australian citizen or permanent resident;
- Special eligibility migrants - former citizens or residents wanting to return to Australia, or certain New Zealanders.

At the moment there are 100,000 to 110,000 places set aside for migrants who fulfil these requirements.11

**What needs to change?**

Unfortunately, Australia remains completely divided on the issue of immigration, particularly in relation to refugees and asylum seekers. Why are we so reluctant to give refuge to the needy? Basically, it is going to take an enormous shift in attitude, away from the racist traditions of the past, for Australia to offer the kind of assistance it is capable of to the people who need it most.

**Discussion Topics**

1. What can we do to reconcile public opinion on the issue of immigration?
2. Why have our refugee policies received such negative attention internationally?
3. Do you think we should take in more or less immigrants? Why?

**What to Watch**

- Immigration: The Waves that Shaped Australia
- Admission Impossible: White Australia Policy
- Destination Australia – The Migrant Experience Since 1788

**On the Web**

- The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
- History of Immigration to Australia
- Racism. No way – Classroom Activity
Study Guides

- Destination Australia

References

5. Jupp, James. From White Australia to Woomera. 2002

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