

WHITE AUSTRALIA SAVED AUSTRALIA

Jack Lang

Jack Lang was the Premier of New South Wales during 1925-1927 and 1930-1932. In this extract from his book, I Remember, Lang gives a brief history of the White Australia Policy; exposes how Britain interfered with local attempts to keep the hordes of coloured immigrants from flooding into our country; and praises the policies that established White Australia.

White Australia must not be regarded as a mere political shibboleth. It was Australia's Magna Carta. Without that policy, this country would have been lost long ere this. It would have been engulfed in an Asian tidal wave. There would have been no need for the Japanese to invade this country. We would have been swallowed up by the rolling advance of a horde of colored people, anxious to escape the privations of their own countries and prepared to impose their own standards on this country.

It is necessary only to examine the racial composition of present-day Fiji, where the Hindus have elbowed the natives out of the picture, to visualise what could have happened in this country had the White Australia policy not been fought for doggedly at the end of the 19th Century. We were then fighting for our national survival. Had we weakened, the flood gates would have opened and the natural increase of population according to Asian standards would have done the rest. It would then have been too late. This country would have become a pushover for the Asiatics.

The first Federal Platform for the Labor Party, adopted at an Interstate Conference held in Sydney on January 24, 1900, was a model of brevity. It was the platform on which the party fought its first Federal election in the following year. There were only three planks. They were (1) Electoral Reform, providing for one adult one vote. (2) Total Exclusion of colored and other undesirable races, and (3) Old Age Pensions.

The Conference also agreed that the Constitution should contain machinery for the Initiative and Referendum to alter the constitution, and that instead of double dissolutions there should be a National Referendum to settle deadlocks between the two Houses.

But it was the question of White Australia that knit the first Federal Labor Party together. In 1908 when the party decided to draft a much more elaborate platform, the first plank agreed upon was "Maintenance of White Australia." It headed the list.

So the Australian Labor Party was actually brought together with White Australia as its primary objective. Later the word-spinners put it much more elegantly as "The cultivation of an Australian sentiment, based on the maintenance of racial purity."

That was not, however, the real reason for the development of the White Australia policy. It did not have its origin in any idea of racial superiority, or color prejudice. From the start it was a simple bread-and-butter issue. Australian workers were trying to defend their own living standards. They were trying to save their jobs. They knew that unrestricted immigration of colored races would mean the introduction of a kind of industrial Gresham's Law - the bad wages would put the fair wage out of circulation. The white Australian worker would soon be reduced to coolie levels. Having got rid of convict labor, they did not want to be reduced to the rice bowl. Yet that was the threat that was actually hovering over the people of this country.

The man to whom we owe a great deal for saving Australia was Henry Parkes. He was not only a dogged believer in White Australia, but he also had the practical political brain capable of devising ways and means of overcoming the problem.

Trouble first started during the Gold Rush. It didn't take long for news of the strike to reach the gold merchants of Shanghai and Hong Kong. Chinese had flocked to the Californian fields in 1849, so that even today San Francisco has the largest Chinese settlement outside Asia. Then as the Californians pulled up their grub stakes and followed the trail to the new strikes in the Southern Hemisphere, the Chinese followed on. They were the fossickers of the goldfields.

Trouble broke out between the diggers and the Chinese on the Lambing Flat fields in July, 1861. The tough diggers attacked the Chinese and used strong-arm methods. There were all kinds of wild threats. The Government ordered troops into the fields, including artillery, and in the riots that followed one digger was killed. The miners then decided to take an interest in politics, with the elimination of the Chinese as their first objective. Lambing Flat is in fact just as significant in the history of the Labor Party in this State as Eureka Stockade was in Victoria.

Some of the mining companies had discovered that the Chinese were prepared to work longer hours for much lower wages than Australians. That was the chief reason why they were resented. Trouble spread to the shipping companies, and there were strikes brought about by the employment of Chinese on Australian ships.

Chinese were also coming into Australian ports, deserting and starting their own businesses. Parkes saw what was happening in Sydney. He announced that he was against further Chinese immigration. He was attacked by wealthy employers and accused of having a bias against the Chinese because they were colored. They said he was treating them as an inferior race. Parkes retorted:

"They are not an inferior race. They are a superior set of people. A nation of an old, deep-rooted civilisation. It is because I believe the Chinese to be a powerful race, capable of taking a great hold upon this country, and because I want to preserve the type of my own nation, I am and always have been opposed to the influx of Chinese."

The Cowper Government was the first to introduce a poll-tax on Chinese. After Lambing Flat it introduced a Chinese Immigration and Restriction Act which permitted the entry of only one Chinese to every 10 tons' burden of ship, with a poll-tax of £10 on every Chinese permitted to enter, and an annual payment of £4 for every year he remained in the State. Parkes further tightened the Act, and made the poll-tax apply not only to those coming in by sea, but also to those entering from another State.

In 1888 Parkes imposed even more drastic restrictions. He limited the number to one Chinese passenger to every 300 tons, increased the poll-tax to £100, refused them naturalisation and stipulated that they could not work in the mining industry without a permit from the Minister for Mines.

The fight had only just started. It was one thing imposing a poll-tax, but it was another policing it. One Chinese looked very much like another. Many slipped in without paying the head-tax. Gradually, they started to congregate in Chinese quarters in the city and take up their own occupations. Merchants indentured labor from Canton, and had the Chinese tied up with labor contracts that made them little better than slaves.

Furniture-making became one of the chief occupations. They were excellent cabinet makers. But instead of an eight-hour day, they were working twelve and fourteen hours, seven days a week. One of the principal parts of the city in which they congregated was the notorious Wexford Street, behind Mark Foys. It was a narrow, squalid street with lanes running off it, running from Elizabeth Street to Liverpool Street. It was later resumed for the building of Wentworth Avenue. But not before it had many crimes to its discredit, and a bubonic plague scare as well.

The Chinese also had another settlement out in Waterloo, while they had market gardens in Botany. In the city they had their own joss houses, their own restaurants, and their own stalls in Paddy's Markets. The itinerant Chinese vendor with his bamboo over his shoulder, carrying large vegetable baskets at each end, or selling feather dusters from door to door was a feature of inner city life. Personally most of the vendors were popular, and honest to a fault. But the trade unions realised that if the Chinese could get away with long hours and low pay they would not be in the race to get better conditions.

Urged on by the Labor Party, George Reid, in 1897, had a Bill for the Exclusion of Inferior Races passed through both Houses. When it reached the Governor, he decided to reserve it for Royal Assent. It was forwarded to Downing Street, and the British Government ruled that it would infringe on Britain's trading treaties with China, and might even endanger the holding of Hong Kong. So on the advice of her Government, Queen Victoria refused her Royal Assent. Reid returned to the attack, and passed another Bill which authorised the N.S.W. Immigration authorities to apply a dictation test to any intending immigrant, if they so decided. That was the origin of the Dictation Test device, which was later incorporated into the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1901 and is still there. It has given the lawyers many rich briefs and has had some strange interpretations - even to the extent of being applied to British subjects with the approval of the High Court.

But in 1898 Reid only wanted to keep out the Chinese. There was no real trouble about other colored races. There were a few Hindus outback. There were Afghan hawkers with their camels along the Darling.

In Queensland they had the Kanaka problem with the sugar cane industry. The sugar mills said they couldn't compete with sugar grown with colored labor in the West Indies, or even Fiji. So they recruited island labor from the South Seas, who were called "Kanakas." Polynesians were indentured for five years at nominal wages. That led to the black-birding of labor in the islands by bullying captains. The Queensland Labor Party under Dawson and Fisher led the fight against Black Australia. Sir Samuel Griffiths, later Chief Justice, took up the cause and agreed to legislate to prohibit the importation of Kanakas from the islands. He won the elections and passed the Act. Then the sugar combine got to work. They told him that he would ruin the sugar industry. Griffiths then repudiated his election pledge, on which he had beaten McIlwraith and brought in a number of regulations regarding how the blacks should be employed. Labor kept up the fight in Queensland and eventually won, after agreeing to the proposition that the sugar industry should be subsidised by a bounty to keep it white. That was not until after Federation.

Meanwhile, Labor in New South Wales still had to win its fight. In the very first Labor League Conference in 1891 a motion was carried, and placed on the party's platform providing that all furniture made by Chinese labor should be stamped. It was generally believed that much of the work was shoddy.

Later, conference after conference dealt with the problem. The Furnishing Trade Union led the fight. They contended that white labor could not compete with colored labor because of the hours and conditions.

The Labor Party platform adopted by the 1909 Conference passed a resolution that the following should be placed on the fighting platform to be implemented by the first Labor Government to be elected:

(a) "All Chinese furniture factories to be restricted to 48 hours per week, and that the 48 hours be worked between 7.30 a.m. and 6 p.m., Mondays to Fridays inclusive, and between 7.30 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Saturdays, and that overtime can only be worked after obtaining the sanction of the Department of Labor and Industry."

(b) "All Chinese furniture and other manufactures be so stamped."

That went on to the platform and remained there many years. The McGowen Government did nothing. The Holman Government had too many other matters on its mind, and during the First World War, the trade unions were not so active in their demands. Then John Storey again shelved the Trades Hall requests for action.

It was not until my Government passed the necessary legislation in 1926 that such furniture had to be properly stamped.

It had been almost impossible to police the Factories Act, while the Chinese could be used in back yards and back rooms. The finished goods were sold through wholesalers, and the retailers had no way of telling whether they were made by Chinese or white labor. But the stamping provisions ended all such doubts. The name of the manufacturer had to be clearly shown, and the industrial inspectors did the rest. The union also adopted an O.K. card, so that it was able to police the workers inside the industry, and inspect conditions.

It meant that Chinese employed in the industry had to get the same wages and conditions as other unionists. It ended the unfair competition. It also ended the shoddy furniture business. The union had the right to see that furniture was true to label, and institute prosecutions if any misrepresentation was being made. With all these precautions, it was not long before the threat of colored labor had disappeared from the industry. Trade union action finished the job started by the legislators.

Those who advocate admission of colored labor quotas invariably ignore the economic reasons responsible for the White Australia policy. While they had their origin in the anxiety of Australian workers to maintain their standards of living, the White Australia policy has more than justified itself on national security grounds. If this country had admitted Japanese even to the same degree that Honolulu admitted Japanese, what would our position have been in 1942? Would it be safe to admit unlimited numbers of Indonesians, Hindus or Chinese today?

Even the United States has had to wrestle with the problems of Jim Crowism, racial segregation and color discrimination. Labor didn't want this country to have similar problems. Had we listened to the do-gooders and the crusaders for international brotherhood and racial equality, the barriers would have come down long ago. Our living standard would have been destroyed. We would have had intermarriages of races, half-castes and quarter-castes with all the social dilemmas that invariably follow such racial mixtures. We would have had a Black, Brown and Brindle streak right through every strata of our society. Instead we risked the charge that we were drawing the color line. We decided to keep this country as a citadel of the white peoples. Australia is still White Australia thanks to those who battled against those who wanted to exploit colored labor for their own ends.

We must keep it that way.

This document is an extract from Jack Lang's book, *I Remember*, first published in 1956 (Chapter Six, "White Australia Saved Australia").