

Racism: whitewashing the class divide

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What we heard was often disturbing. Participants identifiable as Arab or Muslim by their dress, language, name or appearance told of having been abused, threatened, spat on, assailed with eggs, bottles, cans and rocks, punched and even bitten. Drivers have been run off the road and pedestrians run down on footpaths and in car parks. People reported being fired from their jobs or refused employment or promotion because of their race or religion. Children have been bullied in school yards. Women have been stalked, abused and assaulted in shopping centres. Private homes, places of worship and schools were vandalized and burned.

Dr William Jonas, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003¹

After the election of the Howard government in 1996, Australia became a significantly more racist society. The 1996 election saw the rise of Pauline Hanson, who built a mass political movement around hatred of Aboriginal people, Asian people and refugees.² John Howard implemented much of Hanson's racist agenda. The Coalition parties launched a vicious scare campaign against the limited land rights Aboriginal people had won in the High Court in the Mabo (1992) and Wik (1996) decisions, claiming that they might allow Aborigines to claim most of the continent, including suburban back yards. By 1998, much of what the High Court had given had been abolished by Parliament (see chapter 8). In 2004, after eight years vilifying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Government abolished it. Howard's response to Hanson was to 'welcome the fact that people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or as a racist', thus giving her considerable respectability.³ Of course, racists have never lived in fear in Australia, but Aborigines, Asians and Muslims certainly have.

The Coalition Government whipped up paranoia about Muslims, people from the Middle-East and asylum seekers. It used the most emotive and dishonest words it could find, accusing them of being 'illegal', 'ungrateful' and 'queue jumpers'; people who could be 'murderers', 'terrorists', even 'war criminals'; of trying to 'intimidate', 'coerce' and 'blackmail' Australia; and of launching 'an assault on our borders'.⁴ In this way, wild theories aired on talk-back radio were given credibility. It set up brutal detention centres in the desert at Woomera and at Port Hedland and Curtin Air Force Base in the remote north of Western Australia. Traumatized men, women and children were locked up for

months and even years, reinforcing the lie that they might be dangerous. Yet they were mostly ordinary people fleeing the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and the fundamentalist regime in Iran. In a ruthless bid for re-election in 2001, the Government used the military to prevent asylum seekers, rescued by the Norwegian ship the Tampa, from landing at an Australian port. The Navy kidnapped them and took them to Nauru instead, to languish on a scorching, barren island. Howard then created widespread hostility towards refugees by falsely claiming that some had thrown their children into the sea to force the Australia Navy to rescue them. ‘I don’t want people like that in Australia,’ he declared, creating the impression that it was the cultural background of the asylum seekers that had led them—supposedly—to treat their children so callously.⁵ Within days, the Prime Minister knew that the accusation of ‘children overboard’ was a lie, but refused to tell the truth for months, so that racist agitation could continue unchecked.⁶

Racism exists ‘where a group of people is discriminated against on the basis of characteristics which are held to be inherent in them as a group.’ These characteristics are not necessarily physical. With the discrediting of traditional skin-colour racism and Nazi theories of racial superiority, most racism today is based on supposedly unbridgeable cultural differences. Whether it is their appearance or culture that is targeted, ‘the victim of racism can’t change herself and thus avoid oppression.’⁷ Muslims are not judged according to their individual actions, but on the basis of a cultural stereotype portrayed as barbaric. This was apparent in hostile messages sent to the refugee rights campaign in 2001.

Many people of Muslim background unfortunately come from an intolerant, prejudiced and violent culture...

I don’t care whether they are genuine refugees or not. They are all potential terrorists and they aren’t even Christian...

I am an Australian. I was born here...and I abide by all the laws. These wogs commit crimes in their own country then come here and become involved in more crimes!...If I see any of these bastards I will run them over and ship them out to see [sic] myself...

Go to Lakemba and see how the ‘real’ Aussies suffer because of multiculturalism.⁸

When a series of group sexual assaults took place in south-west Sydney in 2000-2002, the crimes were racialised by the media and Bob Carr’s State Labor Government. Radio shock-jock Alan Jones depicted the rapes as ‘the first signs of an Islamic hatred towards the community that welcomed them.’⁹ The actions of a few young men were presented as the product of their cultural background and the media demanded that the entire Lebanese Muslim population take responsibility for their behaviour. Yet the young men were all second-generation, born in Australia, educated and

socialised in Australian schools. It is worth comparing this racist frenzy to another appalling series of group sexual assaults that happened at the same time in Sydney.

The perpetrators were teenage males from the same religious background, and police stated to the court that the practices of violence, humiliation and bullying were endemic to the subculture of these young men. The group sexual assaults involved elements of torture...¹⁰

The offenders received relatively light sentences, and their cases were not racialised in the media. Was this because they were ruling class boys from Trinity Grammar School?

The attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, on 11 September 2001, led to greatly increased hostility towards Arab and Muslim people in every western country, despite the fact that the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims condemned the attack and sympathised with the families of those killed. George Bush's so-called 'war on terror' was presented by many in the media as a necessary war on Islam.¹¹ In a major investigation in 2003, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found that 93 per cent of Arab and Muslim people surveyed believed racism and abuse directed against their communities had increased since September 11 and 64 per cent said there was 'a lot more'. The Australian Arabic Council told of a twenty-fold rise in reports of discrimination and vilification of Arab people in the month after 11 September and the Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association in Sydney claimed a 'phenomenal' increase in the number of such reports.¹² Thirteen years earlier, there had been another wave of violence against Muslims as a result of the previous Gulf War, culminating in the firebombing of the Rooty Hill Islamic Cultural Centre.¹³

Racism in Australia: three interweaving dynamics

No ruling class can dominate society using force alone. If a small minority is to exploit the vast majority without constant, violent upheavals, the dominant ideas in society must justify its power and activities: it must exercise ideological hegemony. Like nationalism, racism has created imagined communities, embracing members of different and hostile social classes, and the illusion of social contradictions within the working class (see Introduction). One of the most important functions of racism is to 'naturalise inequality'.¹⁴ Someone who believes that Aboriginal people are 'backward', 'lazy' or 'careless with money' is at the same time conditioned to accept that white poverty is the fault of the poor. So racism is promoted by the ruling class, not only because many of its members are racists themselves, but because racism serves their interests in practice.

The widespread acceptance of ruling class ideas leads most writers to see racism in Australia as essentially working class, arguing that it is workers and poor people who feel most threatened by

immigration and cultural and economic change.¹⁵ But this confuses symptoms with causes. There *has* been a long history of racism within the working class but racism in Australia has always been driven by ruling class needs. When large numbers of workers swallowed John Howard's racism, by voting for him, they got his hated Goods and Services Tax (GST) and gave him the opportunity to hollow out Medicare, turn his back on the Kyoto protocol, undermine their trade unions and erode their rights at work. By regarding refugees and immigrants as a threat, they were distracted from seeing the genuine threats from industrial relations 'reform', corporate globalisation, militarism, welfare cuts and harsh employers—all class issues. Thus Howard's success in promoting racism benefited both his party, and the ruling class more broadly.

The form racism takes in any country will depend on the concrete interests of the majority of the ruling class. There are three major dynamics shaping racism in Australia:

1. Racism towards indigenous people was first used to justify *dispossession* and genocide, then to excuse ruthless exploitation and brutal measures of social control as indigenous people refused to 'die out', leaving many dependent on white society but not accepted into it as equals (see chapter 8).
2. Racism towards Asian people was grounded in *strategic fears*. The ruling class came to fear that it did not have the power to prevent Chinese colonisation of major parts of Australia. Later it was concerned about being too weak to resist an armed attack from Asia's first great power, Japan. Anti-Asian racism was a racism of *exclusion*.
3. Governments and employers used racism as a *divide and rule* tactic to contain challenges to their authority. From the first, racism divided convicts from Aborigines. Later prejudices against the Irish weakened a working class that mostly came from the British Isles. After World War II, southern Europeans and, more recently, immigrants from the Middle East and Asia have been the targets of this racism.

The following sections look at the way the second and third dynamics of racism gave rise to anti-Asian and anti-immigrant racism in Australia. They deal with the White Australia Policy, multiculturalism, the resurgence of racism since the early 1980s and the future of anti-racism.

The White Australia Policy¹⁶

According to the Australian nationalism that developed in the 1880s, to be truly Australian meant being 'white'. After federation in 1901, the first major act of the new Australian parliament was to pass laws which aimed to prevent non-European people from migrating to Australia and to deport most of the Pacific Island labourers who had been working on Queensland's sugar fields. For the

next 65 years, the conservative and Labor parties competed to demonstrate their commitment to White Australia.

The White Australia Policy is surrounded by mythology. No myth is more pernicious than the idea that it was a product of working class agitation—starting with anti-Chinese riots by gold miners in the 1850s. In fact, the anti-Chinese movement which led to White Australia began in the mid-1870s. Anti-Chinese laws passed in Victoria, NSW and SA during the gold rushes had all been repealed long before. In 1877, the Queensland parliament adopted legislation restricting Chinese immigration. It was tightened in 1884 and again in 1887, in each case before similar steps in the other colonies. This is important because, until the mid-1880s, Queensland had virtually no labour movement. The mythology of White Australia says that Australia's ruling class (and particularly the squatters) were initially hostile to anti-Chinese laws, but the Queensland parliaments which passed the 1877 laws were amongst the most squatter-dominated parliaments *ever* in Australia and the unelected upper house was more militant on the issue than the Legislative Assembly.

Two concerns underpinned the introduction of the White Australia Policy. The first was strategic. In 1874, a gold rush had begun on the Palmer River, on Cape York Peninsula, and 17 000 Chinese miners came. The Government was terrified that the north would be colonised by Chinese people, beyond the control of the Queensland authorities. In one parliamentary debate, the former owner of the conservative Brisbane *Courier* newspaper, Thomas Stephens, argued

It was certain that with the present influx of Chinese, two or three years would not pass before Government would find that every Government officer, every white man, would be driven from the North... a military force would be required to regulate or coerce the Chinese two hundred and fifty miles inland from the coast.¹⁷

Underlying this fear was the idea that Britain and China were rivals in the business of colonising Australia. NSW Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, painted China as a land 'containing nearly 400 000 000 of souls, where the conditions of life were so trying that it was hard to find standing room, where any outlet would be eagerly seized upon.' It was just 'an easy journey from us over a pleasant sea' and without restriction, Chinese people 'would outnumber the Europeans on this soil'.¹⁸

To understand Parkes's concern, we must remember that when the British Government annexed Australia, it seized an entire continent, over five per cent of the land mass of the entire planet. But the Anglo-Australian ruling class has never been able to organise extensive capitalist development in the tropical north of Australia. So there is a vast area, near to Asia, in which only a tiny population lives. Tropical Australia covers around three million square kilometres. If it were an independent country, it would be the eighth largest in the world, a little smaller than India. But,

where India has a population of over a billion people, tropical Australia is home to just over a million, most of whom live along the Queensland coast from Rockhampton to Cairns. Even today, members of the capitalist class and government are still concerned about their control of the north.¹⁹ Fears about the vulnerability of northern Australia are also an important justification for the US alliance. The greed of the British ruling class, in seizing a land it could not use, burdened Australians with a long history of racist paranoia, militarism and support for imperialism. In the 1870s-1880s, these fears were far more intense than today.

The second main ruling class concern also related to tropical Australia. In the nineteenth century, British investors set up profitable plantations growing sugar, coffee, tobacco and other products, in tropical colonies, using African slaves and later indentured labourers who were subjected to brutal conditions of life and work. There was a huge debate within the Australian ruling class, as well as amongst the population in general, over the growing sugar industry in Queensland. Some capitalists regarded plantations as the only way to develop the north and make profits. Others saw this as the beginning an economy, very much like the one that had been based on slavery in the southern states of the USA. Many feared a 'black north' of semi-slave colonies would hold back modern capitalist development and perhaps lead to civil war in the future.

These two issues came together in a conflict over the Northern Territory in the late 1880s. The South Australian Government, which administered the Northern Territory, had invested huge amounts of money in a vain attempt to develop a plantation economy there. By 1880, Darwin was a predominantly Chinese town. By 1887, more than six thousand Chinese people far outnumbered the few hundred Europeans. In the eastern colonies, the media and leading politicians whipped up fear of a Chinese invasion. They pressured South Australia to close Darwin to Chinese immigration. In Sydney, Chinese people who had arrived (mostly legally) were prevented from landing in April 1888, in a forerunner of the Tampa crisis. In a climate of hysteria, all the Australian colonies rushed through harsh, anti-Chinese legislation and declared themselves 'white'. This was when the White Australia Policy really began.

The labour movement played second fiddle in the campaign to stop Asian immigration. Racist agitators played on workers' insecurities over jobs and wages, to mobilise them behind the strategic agenda of the majority of the ruling class. This was helped enormously by employers who occasionally used Chinese workers. Thus when seafarers based in Sydney were replaced by Chinese sailors, their strike became a massive crusade against Chinese immigration, not a crusade against ruthless employers. And the racist campaigning was as much the work of middle class activists in the cities and towns, backed by almost all the media, as of unionists. Such populist campaigns had a

significant political impact, but they were not the reason the ruling class embraced White Australia.²⁰

By making White Australia fundamental to national identity, the ruling class created the illusion of a common interest between workers and employers, and between ordinary Australians and the blood-soaked British Empire. So in the 1890s, when Australian workers formed a party to fight for their class needs against the rich, the Labor Party ‘was racist before it was socialist’.²¹ Thus Labor’s dominant politicians have always been loyal to the British Empire and, later, the US alliance, while racism helped protect the rich through decades of bitter class conflict.

If China was seen as a threat to Anglo-Australian control of the continent in the nineteenth century, Japan played that role in the twentieth (see chapter 10). Anti-Japanese racism was at the core of White Australia for over sixty years. When the Immigration Restriction Act was introduced into federal parliament, Attorney-General Alfred Deakin declared it was ‘primarily aimed against the Japanese’.²² Japan’s victory over Russia in their 1904-1905 war saw militarism grip Australian politics. The Deakin Government, supported by Labor, defied Britain and started building an independent Australian navy, at huge expense, with money that should have been used for unemployment benefits and pensions. The British Government soon used fear of Japan to get the Australian Labor Government of 1910-1913 to prepare for war against Germany, a war in which 60 000 young Australians would die.²³ By the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, Australians had been conditioned to expect a ‘race war’ for more than forty years.

Australian and British racism in turn strengthened the militarists within Japanese politics. At the Versailles Peace Conference, Japan tried to get a resolution passed against racism. It wouldn’t have meant a lot in practice, and both Britain and the US were amenable. But it was the Australian delegation that fought the proposal every inch of the way and ensured it was defeated. Australia’s intelligence chief, Major Piesse, deplored this ‘barren victory’ warning, ‘We have been perhaps the chief factor in consolidating the whole Japanese nation behind the imperialists.’²⁴ British empire racism similarly assisted the victory of militarists in Japan in the 1930s and Japan’s military successes in south-east Asia during the World War II.²⁵

The official White Australia Policy was only ended when it became a major liability. As Asian countries gained independence from 1945 onwards, racism became a major problem for the west in its struggle for influence against the Soviet Union, and the White Australia Policy was hated in the region.²⁶ At the same time, Asian economies were developing and White Australia damaged trade with them. So there were strong reasons for businesspeople, diplomats and academics to politely campaign against it, which they did, mostly behind the scenes. The public, liberal campaign,

spearheaded by the Immigration Reform, was important, but it has received too much credit.²⁷ The Communist Party's arguments in the labour movement against White Australia over many decades were crucial in building working class sympathy for Asian people, a contribution that is rarely acknowledged. Finally, the mass movement against the Vietnam War had to confront the racism of pro-war arguments which were rooted in the myth of the 'yellow peril'. Millions of ordinary people came to see White Australia as reactionary. In 1975, the Whitlam Government completed the process of dismantling it by passing the Racial Discrimination Act.

Although the White Australia Policy had been ditched, anti-Japanese racism remained a factor in Australian politics. It was an aspect of Pauline Hanson's appeal. In the late 1980s, there had been a racist campaign against Japanese investment in Australia and a proposed hi-tech city near Adelaide. In 1980, the Iwasaki tourist development near Rockhampton had been *bombed*. The ruling class has never seriously challenged anti-Japanese racism because it reinforces Australian nationalism and populist justifications for the US alliance.

Divide and rule: cultivating racism towards immigrants

The Australian ruling class has a long experience of promoting racism and profiting from it. In the nineteenth century, it was Irish immigrants who were systematically stigmatised. Resistance to British rule meant that Irish people were always regarded as disloyal and a threat, in much the same manner as Muslims are today. While patriots now judge Islam a 'dangerous' religion, their predecessors had the same attitude to Catholicism. The newspapers portrayed Irish people as 'repulsive' in appearance, stupid, dishonest, always ready to fight, and 'sulky'; and readers were fed an endless diet of Irish 'jokes'.²⁸ Articles in highbrow literary journals asserted that in Ireland, Catholics and Protestants *looked* different, the former 'low of stature, uncouth of feature, and intensely black of hair and eye...servile in manner, voluble of tongue...'²⁹ This racism was part of a wider campaign to discipline an unruly working population, by associating ignorance, dishonesty, immorality and laziness with Irishness. The ruling class 'divided in order to rule what it integrated in order to exploit.'³⁰

Employers also had a long history of using racism against southern European workers, who began to arrive in significant numbers after World War I. One of the key organisations campaigning against migrants was the right wing Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA). In Kalgoorlie (WA) anti-migrant agitation led to riots. The 1934 riot cost two lives and destroyed dozens of houses and businesses chiefly belonging to Italian and Yugoslav migrants.

The main employers of migrants in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill were the big mining companies, which forced them into the lowest paid and most dangerous jobs, where they were subjected to harassment by supervisors. One might imagine that the employers would be hostile to the RSSILA agitation against migrants. In fact, they gave it large sums of money. The RSSILA agitation was never intended to actually stop southern European migration. On the one occasion it did have an impact on the supply of labour, the mining companies moved swiftly to force a backdown. The real aim of the RSSILA and the employers was to divide the multicultural workforce and undermine the effectiveness of trade unions, so that labour could be kept as cheap as possible.

In Broken Hill in 1927, anti-migrant agitation led by a returned soldier activist paralysed union resistance when three of the seven mines closed, throwing 1 200 workers out of work. But the use of racism was resisted. In both Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill, internationalists within the union movement fought for class unity across the ethnic divide. Unionists who resisted the 1934 anti-immigrant violence in Kalgoorlie went on to lead a major strike over working hours in 1935, in which all nationalities participated.³¹

During the sixty years following the World War II, the Australian population was transformed. Its size nearly tripled to over 20 million, a quarter of Australians are immigrants and a quarter also come from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). Since 1983, around 40 per cent of all immigrants have come from Asia.³² Whatever the laments of Pauline Hanson and her ilk, Australia is one of the most cosmopolitan societies in the world, a change unthinkable in 1945. Cultural diversity has led many to see the danger and stupidity in racism, but it has also been used to mobilise racism.

The initial impetus for Australia's mass immigration program was strategic. According to Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, 'If the Pacific War has taught us one thing, it is surely that seven million Australians cannot hold three million square miles of this earth's surface indefinitely.'³³ But as a raging economic boom took hold, severe labour shortages emerged. By 1948, workers had used their bargaining power to drive up wages and win the 40 hour week. Protecting employers from working class militancy became the priority for government, and immigration was designed to deliver cheap labour to big capital. After 1951, the conservative Government of Robert Menzies turned towards encouraging migrants from southern Europe: Italians, Greeks, Maltese, Yugoslavs and Spaniards.³⁴ They were pushed into the dirtiest and most dangerous work and forced to accept wages well below the level demanded by the Australian-born. Migrants from Britain and Northern Europe were able to gain work in skilled trades, business and the professions. The result was a workforce deliberately divided on ethnic lines. From the 1950s to 1981 in Melbourne, some 50 per cent of southern European men were employed in just 15 per cent

of jobs, mostly production and labouring, and mostly low paid. For over 20 years, BHP used newly arrived southern European migrants to work in its Port Kembla (NSW) steel mill to avoid paying market-rate wages and federal governments made supplying new labour to the company a priority.³⁵

During the 1950s and 1960s, conservative governments demanded that migrants ‘assimilate’ into Australian society, and leave their previous customs, languages and cultures behind. It was very difficult to assimilate into a suspicious and hostile society, and the demand for assimilation sent a message that migrants were not really ‘Australian’, adding to the sense of isolation they felt. This policy also encouraged a sense of superiority amongst British-Australians, which (temporarily) strengthened the grip of the Liberal Party over post-war Australia.

But racist segmentation of the workforce had a contradictory effect. ‘Social isolation does not always diminish class conflict; it can also foster militancy’. From the 1960s to the 1980s, migrant workers often started and led some of the most militant strikes against ruthless employers: at General Motors in Melbourne in 1964, Ford in 1973, and the Redfern Mail Exchange in Sydney in 1985. Migrant militancy had the effect of building links with Anglo-Australians and amongst other national groups. During an eleven day strike at Port Phillip Mills in Melbourne, in May 1993, an amazing solidarity and friendship developed on the picket lines amongst Serbs, Croats and Macedonians, whose former homeland, Yugoslavia, was being torn apart by war and ‘ethnic cleansing’. This unity was sustained long after the end of the successful strike. The 1973 strike at the Ford Broadmeadows factory in Melbourne had united Greek and Turkish people, at a time when the countries they had come from were engaged in a bitter conflict over the Greek annexation of Cyprus. Vietnamese workers played a major role in a long strike at the Toyota-ANI factory in Melbourne, in 1980, and were the most active picketers during the 1985 strike at the Redfern Mail Exchange in Sydney. NESB migrants have often forced the pace of class struggle in postwar Australia.³⁶

The late 1960s and 1970s were the great years of anti-racist struggle. Alongside working class migrant militancy, there were massive political campaigns against the Vietnam War, against apartheid in South Africa and for Aboriginal rights. Labor and Liberal governments promoted multiculturalism and the majority of Australians embraced the extraordinary change to their society. But multiculturalism was a deeply contradictory strategy at every level. It had an anti-racist element, as it promoted a culturally diverse population as a good thing in itself. Governments funded SBS radio and TV, and admitted an increasing number of migrants from Asia. At the same time multiculturalism also asserted a new kind of control over migrants. It insisted that migrants give Australia their first loyalty—an Australia with its nationalism still rooted in the ‘achievements’ of British colonialism. Multiculturalism defined migrants according to their national origins and

meant ‘the invalidation of the class history of ethnic Australians and the reconstruction of their experience and histories...as totally cultural’, in other words, ‘non-political’.³⁷ Governments set up structures to incorporate and privilege middle class and ruling class elements from migrant populations. In return for this and the increased status they gained in their communities, these ‘ethnic leaders’ had to identify and contain migrant discontent, and channel it into lobbying for services and policies on the basis of ethnicity.³⁸

From multiculturalism to the new racist offensive

If the late 1960s and 1970s saw a partial winding back of racism, the 1980s saw the start of a new racist offensive. In 1984, the well-known historian Geoffrey Blainey attacked Asian immigration while mining boss, Hugh Morgan started a vicious campaign against Aboriginal culture. Blainey ‘warned’ of a conspiracy to Asianise Australia. He used the language of invasion, of Australian suburbs as the ‘front line’ against Asian immigration, and declared there would be ‘bloodshed’ unless immigration policy reflected what he called community concern. While the Labor Government of Bob Hawke eventually denounced his views, the Liberal opposition, led by John Howard, later took them up. Blainey and Morgan helped break the mainstream taboos on openly racist agitation.³⁹

Blainey and Morgan reflected a wider shift in thinking on the right. The economic crisis of the mid-1970s led to the emergence of a ‘new right’ committed to economic deregulation, privatisation, the smashing of unions, the destruction of welfare, a society based on ‘individual responsibility’ and the rule of market forces. Many of these ideas are part of the mainstream today but, in the late 1970s, they were seen as wild-eyed and difficult to implement. Thatcher and Reagan did implement them in Britain and the United States. The use of racism to attack welfare was a major aspect of their successful strategy. Black people in Britain and the USA were portrayed as alien, unintegrated and locked in ghettos they did not want to leave. Society was not responsible for the problems black people faced. Bleeding-heart liberal elitists, the new right argued, had allowed blacks to blame white people, rather than take responsibility for solving their own problems like everyone else. The solution was to get rid of the culture of dependency. Racism became a battering ram against welfare and any notion that governments had a responsibility for solving social problems.⁴⁰

In the 1980s, John Howard was the Liberal leader most committed to attacking welfare, workers’ rights and government services. But he also understood that economic liberalism on its own would not win elections for the conservatives.

Howard was the first Liberal to grasp that free market economics required a moral dimension and that the power of free market economics must be offset by an equally powerful theory of social order... The issue can be stated simply—free markets have the potential to destroy the social status quo. They can uproot communities, transfer capital and labour from one location to another and demolish long-established social ties and employment habits. Many consequences flow from this reality—that the more people grasp the meaning of free market economics, the more apprehensive they will become...⁴¹

In order to hide the ugly truth about his ruling class economic agenda, Howard built a conservative social politics focused on the traditional nuclear family, individual responsibility and chauvinistic nationalism. In 1988, he launched an attack on the level of Asian immigration. This threatened new investment and trade links in the region. He was repudiated by the Labor Government, powerful sections of the media and many in his own party. But the Liberal Party turned back to embrace Howard's approach when they lost the 'unloseable' 1993 federal election on a narrowly economic rationalist platform.

Howard set out to appeal to the millions of poor Australians whose futures had been thrown into turmoil by the economic restructuring of the Hawke and Keating Governments (see chapter 4). He and other conservatives supported that restructuring, but sought to mobilise the anger and resentment into racist nationalism and hostility towards welfare. Liberal Party pollster, Mark Textor, assiduously studied the racial outlook of Australian voters. His polling formed the basis for Howard's notorious 2001 election campaign.⁴² In this way, some working class people were turned against their own interests. In 2000, when Labor politician Anthony Albanese, campaigned against the GST in northern NSW amongst some of the poorest people in Australia—those living in caravan parks—he found far more concern about the supposed threat of boat people, than about a tax that would make them even poorer.⁴³

Since the Vietnam war, Labor has been identified with anti-racism. But Labor's ability to fight the racism of Coalition governments has been compromised by its own history and ideology. The Hawke-Keating Governments imposed neo-liberal economic policies, making Labor incapable of challenging the economic agenda behind Howard's use of racism. Labor's commitment to the Australian state has seen it share the wider ruling class militarism and fear of losing control of the north. It was an ALP government that began the cruel business of locking up asylum seekers in the late 1980s. Finally, Labor's electoralism makes it hesitant about confronting racist hysteria. This cowardice saw the ALP back the Tampa kidnapping, the 'Pacific solution' of dumping refugees in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, the detention centres and then the draconian 'security' laws passed

as part of the 'war on terror'. Labor's leader from late 2003, Mark Latham, shared most of the Coalition's economic liberalism and much of John Howard's hostility to welfare and refugees.

The future of anti-racism in Australia

Despite Australia's history of racism, there has also been a long record of ordinary people from different backgrounds living together peacefully and supportively. A year after Blainey's attack on Asian immigration, research showed that 'at the close neighbourhood level a good majority of Australian-born respondents...were demonstrating patterns of latent if not actual goodwill towards Asian migrant families.' Prejudice *did* exist, but was less pronounced in the so-called 'front-line' suburbs.⁴⁴ This pattern refuted one of the most popular explanations for racism is that it is caused by living near people who are different.⁴⁵ Yet support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation was strongest in Queensland where non-English speaking migrants were fewest.⁴⁶

Australia also has a history of resistance to racism. Australians today take equality between Catholics and Protestants for granted, but there was no such equality a century ago; it had to be fought for and the early trade unions and Labor Party were crucial. In public meetings featuring the future Labor Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, the chair would announce 'We'll have no damn sectarian questions here!' and have offenders removed.⁴⁷ In the postwar years, migrant workers used their economic power to improve wages and working conditions and to establish greater solidarity with Anglo-Australian workers. The common experience of exploitation and the need to unite in order to defend common working class interests has been one of the most powerful sources anti-racist activity in Australia. The other has been opposition to the militarism that has been the never ending consequence of a tiny, Anglo-Australian ruling class seizing an entire continent. The enormous radicalisation that grew out of opposition to the World War I gave rise to a Communist Party which, however imperfect it was, fought the White Australia Policy more consistently and more courageously than any other element in Australian society. The movement against the Vietnam War had to ideologically challenge the anti-Asian racism that was used to mobilise popular support for the war.

Mass opposition to the 1991 Gulf War, then to the so-called 'war on terror' after September 2001, and the brutal treatment of asylum seekers has created a new anti-racist current which has challenged the widespread lies about Middle-Eastern people and Islam. This resistance has had some significant successes. The global movement against the war in Iraq has put pressure on US imperialism and built greater understanding of Islam. Protest action by asylum seekers in detention combined with the work of the large refugee rights movement shifted public opinion away from xenophobia. While 56 per cent of those polled in October 2001 had supported turning back all

refugee boats, a minority of 35 per cent did so in August 2004.⁴⁸ Refugees had become an important part of some rural areas and the support they received from their communities led to tensions within the Government. Thousands of ordinary people began to write to refugees in detention centres. In 2004, a contestant protested on the 'reality' TV show, *Big brother*, against the treatment of refugees. A large minority of the audience supported his action. By mid-2004, with an election looming, the Government was sufficiently worried that it installed a new Minister, Vanstone, to tone down some of its harshest policies.

The real hope for the future lies in the contradictions within the support base for racism. Howard offered ordinary 'battlers' nothing but fear, softened by bigotry and chauvinistic nationalism. Should those 'battlers' decide to start mobilising to defend their economic and social position, they will find themselves confronting governments and ruling class racists. Whether they identify the link between capitalist exploitation and racism will partly depend on what anti-racists do.

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- 7 Alex Callinicos *Race and class*, Bookmarks, London, 1993, p. 18.
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