

Not 'desirable':  
Government scapegoating of Jewish refugees

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## Abstract

The quota imposed by the Australian government on Jewish refugees in the late 1930s has always been controversial. Most historians have held that the policy was adopted because that Australian public was anti-Semitic, and in particular that workers objected to Jews as a source of cheap labour. The policy is thus seen as a reflection of the racism already present in the community.

This explanation ignores the sizeable support that Jewish refugees had amongst the community, especially as victims of fascism. On balance the press was favorable, and the labor movement not particularly anti-Semitic. The ACTU and Sydney TLC both called for *increased* numbers of working class refugees. Anti-Semitism did exist, but it was not dominant in the community. Rather, the situation was one of ambiguity, in which strong leadership could have an important influence on public opinion.

Instead, the government deliberately reinforced racial prejudice. Repeatedly, the government stressed that they would not allow refugees to undermine work conditions, despite the fact that their own inquiries showed the refugees posed no threat to workers. Anti-Semitism was not confronted by this position, but validated, reinforcing workers' fear of refugees.

Why was this racist policy adopted? It was not a response to demands by workers. Workers were also concerned about immigration from Britain and Northern Europe, which the government encouraged. In fact, scapegoating of refugees was precisely designed to aid large scale immigration. By emphasising the perceived racial differences of the Jewish refugees an object for the fear of workers was created, distracting attention from other immigrants. The refugees thus acted as a lightning rod for criticism of the government, a policy which seems to have been somewhat successful. The government therefore showed it was prepared to encourage anti-Semitism in order to fulfill the perceived needs of capitalism for an increased labour supply.

**T**he Australian government's self-interested stance towards refugees dates back to before World War II, and its reception of refugees fleeing Hitler, many of whom were Jewish. By severely limiting refugee numbers, the Australian government contributed, however inadvertently, to the Holocaust. As such, the policy has attracted much scholarly attention. The focus here is thus not events themselves, but rather on understanding why the government instituted a restrictive policy. Current accounts see the government as largely passive, and do not seek to examine public opinion or government policy in the wider context of social relations. This paper challenges their conclusions by examining the issue from a broader perspective of class relations. Public opinion on this issue is seen as contested, reflecting wider political dynamics. The government was thus able to play the major role in solidifying and directing the public's response to the refugees. In particular, the government 'sold' its policy of exclusion through racial categorisation, thus reinforcing existing racism and constructing an image of Jewish refugees as undesirable and a threat to economic conditions. This was not an accidental result on the part of the government. By racialising the immigration issue, the government created a class of 'unacceptable' immigrants in the refugees, which detracted attention away from the government's own plans for greater immigration from England and Northern Europe, who were portrayed as racially acceptable. The episode thus provides a case study on the manipulation of racist sentiments through administrative policy, a process which at times can serve quite specific purposes for the capitalist class.

Although Germany's Jewish population and other oppressed groups sought to leave Germany from the early 1930s, it was not until the situation became desperate that Australia became a popular place of refuge. In particular, the *Anschluss* annexing Austria to Germany in March 1938 and the *Kristallnacht* pogrom in November 1938 forced many Jews to flee, regardless of the desirability of the end location.<sup>1</sup> However, the Lyons government's response to the refugee crisis was initially extremely hostile, as indicated by its stance at the Evian conference in July 1938, called by Roosevelt to find an international solution. Differing from other countries' positions only in its blunt honesty, Australia's delegate stated significant numbers of refugees would not be accepted by Australia, because she had 'no real racial problems, [and is] not desirous of importing one'<sup>2</sup>. This

initially intransigent position was modified in the face of both international pressure and lobbying from Jewish groups in Australia, which intensified with each new incident of oppression in Europe.<sup>3</sup> The culmination of the policy came in December 1938, when the Minister for the Interior John McEwen announced that 15,000 refugees would be allowed into the country over a period of three years. It was argued that such a stand would fulfill Australia's humanitarian obligations, while the limited numbers would prevent the displacement of Australian workers and preempt the rise of anti-Semitism. This position was largely welcomed both domestically and overseas.<sup>4</sup>

However, this apparent generosity masked severe limitations which had been placed on refugees, and in particular Jews. In 1936 the Lyons government had largely removed the bans placed on immigration during the Depression, allowing European migrants relatively free access to the country provided they had sufficient funds to support themselves on arrival, and would not displace Australian workers.<sup>5</sup> After the *Anschluss*, thousands of refugees began applying to enter Australia.<sup>6</sup> It was acknowledged that the vast majority of refugees, totaling perhaps 20,000 in 1938, would be able to satisfy the immigration qualifications.<sup>7</sup> Thus in June 1938 Cabinet decided on a quota system restricting refugee migration, which only underwent minor adjustments before its official launch in December. The administration of this quota divided refugees into the racial categories of 'Jew's' 'Christian non-Aryans' and 'Aryans', the same categories used by the Nazi regime itself.<sup>8</sup> The extensive administrative use of this overtly racial classification, and the fact that large numbers of refugees were rejected simply because they were Jewish, were never fully revealed to the Australian public.<sup>9</sup> This fitted with the government's attempts to avoid charges of anti-Semitism. Precise numbers of arrivals are now debated, but probably fewer than half the allotted 15,000 places were taken up before the outbreak of the war.<sup>10</sup> This was largely due to the administrative system which required applications be sent to Canberra for approval before being returned to Europe, a delay of months which proved fatal for many refugees. Even when the system was slightly improved in March 1939, this requirement was retained for Jews.<sup>11</sup>

The treatment of Jewish refugees before WWII has attracted much scholarly attention. Both the reasons for the restrictive policy and its merits have been vigorously debated. Standard explanations generally invoke some combination of personal racism amongst politicians and bureaucrats, and the pressure placed on the government by an anti-Semitic public. The work most strongly emphasising the former is that of Bartrop in *Australia and the Holocaust*. He sees the policy as largely due to the influence of public servants rather than disinterested politicians, arguing that 'the reasons for [the policy's] restrictiveness can be found in an anti-foreign and antisemitic bias prevalent among some key personnel in the government departments during the whole period in question.'<sup>12</sup> The pressure applied

by supporters of refugees could be largely ignored, because a large influx of Jews would not have been supported by the majority of people.<sup>13</sup>

Most authors emphasise public opinion, culminating in Blakeney's influential *The Jewish Refugees*, which gives the most detailed account of the refugee period. As evidence, Blakeney examines entrenched anti-Semitism in Australia. While overt, organised anti-Semitic forces were certainly a 'lunatic fringe', a general, low-level hostility towards Jews was more widespread.<sup>14</sup> This was shown, for example, in the regular stereotyping of Jews in popular publications such as the *Bulletin*. When faced by an influx of refugees, this sentiment expressed itself in a generally hostile press, negative letters sent to the government, and hostile statements in parliament. Most importantly, according to this argument, Jewish people were seen as a threat to wages and working conditions, as well as to general social standards. Thus Blakeney writes that 'the question of Jewish immigration was approached from the position of its likely effect upon unemployment.'<sup>15</sup> Importantly, such allegations were leveled in particular at Jews from central and eastern Europe, rather than the anglicized Jews already in Australia, who were generally held in high esteem.<sup>16</sup> The government was not willing to risk angering the electorate, and in particular workers, by admitting large numbers of refugees. What public support there was, including the sympathy of many members of parliament, was thus overridden.

A range of evaluations of the policy have arisen from this analysis. Some authors have criticised the government for its hard-line approach, arguing more could have been done to confront public opinion and help refugees.<sup>17</sup> More conservative historians have tended to be apologetic towards the policy, pointing to its relative liberalism compared to some countries, and the difficult situation in which the government found itself.<sup>18</sup> It is argued that negative evaluations, which point out the destruction of life which could have been prevented, read the Holocaust back into a time when it could not have been foreseen.<sup>19</sup> However, whatever their attitude to the policy, these authors all see the government as basically reacting to public sentiment. The popularity of the government's stance and the negative response to those refugees who did arrive are seen as confirmation that the government acted in accordance with majority public opinion.

Neither of the two major explanations examined satisfactorily account for the refugee program when it is seen as part of the wider balance of social forces. That there was hostility to Jewish people among politicians and bureaucrats seems undeniable, and obviously if anti-racists had been predominant in the government, a policy of a race based quota would not have been adopted. However, this leaves unanswered why racism manifested itself in this particular way at this time. Cabinet members were not virulent anti-Semites, although some members of parliament were. Arguably, there was just as

much hostility towards Southern Europeans, who were eventually welcomed into post-War Australia, an indication of how flexible the personal sentiments of officialdom can be when necessity demands.<sup>20</sup> Bartrop's argument also seems somewhat tautological. The department's actions are (correctly) identified as racist, which is seen as evidence of the officials' personal racism. This is then given as the reason for the policy of exclusion. Whether the politicians and bureaucrats were 'genuinely' racist, or only appear as such due to the policies they instituted, is a largely unanswerable question, and is not necessarily relevant. The central concern is how and why such racism was integrated into public policy.

Current arguments invoking public opinion are also unsatisfying. This issue is now re-examined, in particular focussing on the actual social power represented by various elements of public sentiment. Unfortunately, polling about immigration only began in Australia in 1947. Calculations of public opinion have thus largely rested on examinations of the press. It has been incorrectly argued that press opinion was, on the whole, hostile to the refugees. The *Sydney Morning Herald* is rightly held to be the newspaper most sympathetic to the refugees, but such sentiments were not unique. In fact, most of the mainstream press was generally sympathetic, or at least not strongly opposed to a significant refugee intake. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* expressed hope that Evian would find a solution for the Jews, including bringing some to Australia, and later argued that stories of a foreign invasion were 'silly'.<sup>21</sup> The *Herald Sun* avoids the word 'Jewish', but clearly favoured the admission of migrants seeking entry from Continental Europe, which essentially meant refugees.<sup>22</sup> The press responded favourably to the humanitarian aspect of the quota announcement.<sup>23</sup> The exception to this generally benign position was the open anti-Semitism of the *Bulletin and Truth* publications,<sup>24</sup> part of the same publishing group. It is these publications which are most often cited as evidence of negative feelings towards refugees. However their circulation, to take a very crude measure of public opinion, did not compete with that of the other newspapers.<sup>25</sup>

The strength of opposition to the refugees must also be assessed. It may have been 'vociferous',<sup>26</sup> but it never became organised or achieved any intense popularity. It is significant that there are no reports of mass meetings or rallies opposed to the Jews. Similarly, letters sent to the government are almost entirely from individuals, rather than organisations with real political strength.<sup>27</sup> Much has been made of the negative reception experienced by refugees, but it should also be noted that actual attacks on refugees or an increase in fascist activity was almost entirely absent.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it was opposition the government could have confronted without great concerns they would incite political unrest. The limits of anti-Semitic feeling are shown in the government's denial of

discrimination against Jews, which it would not have bothered to do if it felt discrimination would have been popular.<sup>29</sup>

Conversely, support for the refugees is easily understated. This support was prompted both by humanitarian concerns, as well as pragmatic desires to increase Australia's population, including racist sentiment which feared the approaching 'Yellow Hordes'.<sup>30</sup> An appeal launched by Sydney's Lord Mayor and publicised by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to aid the refugees attracted considerable support.<sup>31</sup> Just as the government received letters opposing refugee arrivals, there were those who supported a sizeable intake, either on humanitarian or pragmatic grounds.<sup>32</sup> Newspapers also received such letters. More publicly, prominent individuals spoke out in favour of the refugees. The Post Master General considered them desirable settlers.<sup>33</sup> Church leaders in particular regularly gave public support.<sup>34</sup> There was also more organised support. The Communist Party was a consistent opponent of the government's restrictive policies, as was the Australian Council for Civil Liberties.<sup>35</sup> The same was true of the Australian League for Peace and Democracy, which was established as a Communist front, but attracted wider public support.<sup>36</sup> This radical support for the refugees was certainly on the fringe of politics, but so was radical anti-Semitism. Finally, as has been well documented, the established Jewish community failed to be strongly in favour of a sizeable refugee intake.<sup>37</sup> The reasons for this are complicated and cannot be explored here, but it should be said that the government deliberately encouraged this response,<sup>38</sup> which might otherwise have been more positive.

A particularly important question is whether demands from workers really led to the quota on refugees. The Government's statements on this issue have largely been taken at face value. They repeatedly stressed that they were concerned not to allow refugees to affect workers adversely,<sup>39</sup> and this has been accepted as the reason for the quota. The opinions of 'working class' publications such as the *Bulletin* and the *Truth* are also cited in this respect. However, these were not the working class's own publications. The union and labour press, the expression of its political organisations, have largely been ignored by historians of the issue. They never made a great issue out of the refugees, and their position was ambiguous. For instance, one issue of the *Worker* contained a sympathetic feature entitled 'The Tragedy of the Jews', as well as a column denouncing 'A Foreign Labor Menace'.<sup>40</sup> An article in February 1939 condemned anti-Semitism.<sup>41</sup> More importantly, peak labour organisations gave their support. In November 1938 the NSW Trades and Labor Council called for the admission of refugees.<sup>42</sup> After the quota was announced, the NSW TLC and the ACTU both called for more refugees to be selected from amongst Europe's working class,<sup>43</sup> who would presumably have competed most directly for jobs. The working class was therefore far from unanimously opposed to the refugees, and indeed could have been mobilised in their support. There is also evidence that the

middle classes, both professionals and small traders, were the most hostile to refugees, because it was mainly from these classes which refugees were being accepted.<sup>44</sup> This pressure is certainly part of 'public opinion', but it is not the sector which either the government at the time, or most historians, have pointed to as an important factor.

It must also be questioned whether the government would necessarily respond to pressure from workers. Politically organised labour was more concerned about the export of iron to Japan as they were about refugees, attempting to force the government to cease the practice.<sup>45</sup> In response, Lyons argued that he 'could not allow any section of the community to usurp the functions of the Government', and that workers should not determine foreign policy.<sup>46</sup> Most importantly, labour was opposed to immigration in general, rather than Jewish immigration specifically (although racial prejudices did determine the strength of the feeling), the importance of which will be examined more fully later. Such a position was hardly indicative of feelings of internationalism. But it does raise the question of why the government singled out Jews as a threat to workers, when workers themselves did not necessarily do so.

This is not to deny the presence of anti-Semitism in Australia, including amongst the working class.<sup>47</sup> Current accounts are probably even correct in saying the weight of opinion was against the refugees. However, it must be stressed that the situation was one of fluidity, where the majority of the population probably held no deeply entrenched attitudes regarding refugees in either direction. Most Australians knew and cared little about foreign affairs,<sup>48</sup> and would have been forming opinions as the refugee issue unfolded. Responses to the refugee issue in the press overwhelmingly appeared because of events in Europe or the government's own pronouncements, an indication of the lack of active, concrete opinion either for or against the refugees in Australia. Often evidence of hostility to the Jews after their arrival, or even after the war,<sup>49</sup> is taken as an indication of public opinion, but this is to read back into the government's decision factors which were themselves greatly affected by government policies, as will be argued below.

The government thus had substantial room for manoeuvre. Bartrop has shown how racist attitudes in this period, especially regarding Jews, were changing in sometimes very subtle ways.<sup>50</sup> In this context the impact of a sustained government campaign on public opinion could have had a dramatic effect. In particular, Australians were overwhelmingly hostile towards Nazism. While Hooper is correct in saying there was a dichotomy between this antagonism and negative sentiment towards refugees,<sup>51</sup> this was not a predetermined situation. Attitudes to the refugees certainly softened, for example, after *Kristallnacht*.<sup>52</sup> It was precisely as victims of fascism that the refugees attracted support amongst the labour movement. If the government had stressed the anti-fascist aspects of accepting refugees,

public attitudes might have been very different. Blakeney states that 'anti-Semitism was in the air',<sup>53</sup> but it could just as well be said that anti-racism or even communism were also 'in the air'; how and why such sentiments had few political results remains to be explored.

Hopefully enough has now been said to show that public opinion did not dictate government policy. On the contrary, it is the key contention of this paper that government policy may have been a major factor in determining public opinion. This is argued through a close examination of the nature of the government's public relations efforts on the issue, and its interaction with policy decisions.<sup>54</sup> Policy announcements, press releases and responses to events overseas or in Australia were all used to reinforce the government's position on refugees, which was based on racist assumptions. It is not intended here to replace the view that government policy was dependent on public opinion by claiming that public opinion was entirely determined by the government's actions. The government worked within the contested sphere of public opinion, and, reflecting that uncertainty, was somewhat ambiguous in its public pronouncements. The policy towards refugees was presented as humane, and avoided the image of outright anti-Semitism. In particular the 'new' quota of December 1938 was represented as an increase in refugee intake, which it was not.<sup>55</sup> The policy and its publicity were therefore able to satisfy all but the most ardent supporters or opponents of the refugees, deflecting criticism from the government. On the other hand, the government subtly vilified Jews, as discussed below. By drawing on and encouraging racist perceptions already in existence in the community, it actively helped to coalesce and mould public opinion against a large scale intake of refugees. The mass of public sentiment was thus crystallized in the direction the government found most convenient. Chronological considerations are important here; for example, while the original decision to impose a quota was taken in June the most vicious anti-refugee press campaigns in the *Bulletin* and *Truth* did not begin until October, and peaked after the announcement of the quota in December.

The most important feature of the government's presentation of the refugee issue was its racial basis. The groundwork for this racism was laid at Evian, although later it became more subtle in presentation. The racial mechanisms of the quota have already been mentioned. This was not limited to details of efficient administration,<sup>56</sup> but flowed into the public presentation of this policy. The government often referred to the fact that the refugees were Jewish, or even spoke as if all refugees were Jews.<sup>57</sup> This included stressing the separation of refugees into racial categories when announcing the policy in parliament.<sup>58</sup> That Australia would receive 'Jewish' refugees was not only, predictably, reported by the *Bulletin*, but also by the liberal *West Australian*.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the nature of the repression in Germany focused attention on Jews. But by accepting the terms of Nazi repression, racial perceptions were reinforced in Australia. Because the policy was initially

presented in these terms, any later pronouncement on refugees could be taken as shorthand for comments on Jews, though overtly this could be denied.

It will be recalled the government initiated a quota on refugees long before it was publicly announced. During the intervening time, the government did nothing to help counter the racism and fears of the Australian community. On the contrary, these tendencies were encouraged. Ironically, the first move in this direction was to secure the support of the established Jewish community. Activity amongst Australian Jews to help refugees began in 1937, at the behest of Jewish officials in London.<sup>60</sup> However, it was the government which initiated the Australian Jewish Welfare Society (AJWS) as an integral part of the immigration policy, whose duties included helping in the selection of those who would be granted permits. This entrenched the position of the conservative elements in the Jewish community who had led initial relief efforts, while at the same welded them to a policy of relying on the government's generosity in order to help any refugees at all.<sup>61</sup> Opposition from less conservative Jewish elements was silenced or co-opted.<sup>62</sup> The AJWS's 'sensible' position repeatedly appeared in newspapers, making racist fears seem logical by implying that even anglicized Jews had something to fear from the influx of their Eastern European co-religionists.<sup>63</sup> Administrative policy thus served to mould the opinion of even the established Jewish community, or at any rate, which may have been more important, mold the wider public conception of this opinion.

However, the main mechanism of the government's public relations campaign was direct use of the press. This began in October 1938, when the government assured the public that Jews would not be able to sneak into the country without landing permits. The campaign continued through October and November, the main thrust being that refugees would not be allowed to disrupt Australia's immigration system or labour markets.<sup>64</sup> Although the introduction of a quota was publicly rejected at this stage (despite one having been approved by cabinet months before), McEwen promised that a 'closer check [would] be maintained on the type of aliens who enter the Commonwealth'.<sup>65</sup> Such language dehumanized the plight of people who might otherwise have attracted much public sympathy. The negative portrayal of Jewish refugees continued with the actual announcement of the quota on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. Indeed, the greatest change brought by the 'new' policy was probably the intensity with which the Jewish refugees were vilified.<sup>66</sup> At this stage McEwen emphasised the strong role he was playing in keeping Australia safe from refugees, the press obliging him with headlines such as 'Australia not easy goal for refugees', 'McEwen to control flow of refugees' and 'Entry made harder'.<sup>67</sup>

What impression did the government give of the Jewish refugees? The picture was somewhat ambiguous. It seemed to be defending those who arrived, by stressing the strict

process of selection through which they had passed, ensuring only 'desirable' types arrived.<sup>68</sup> However, this reinforced the idea that there was something to fear from refugees, and that Australians should be suspicious of those who arrived. For example, the use of the word 'desirable' implies that there were thousands of 'undesirable' refugees whom the government was turning away, when in fact under their own criteria they would have been admitted to the country just a year earlier. The most common categorisation of the Jewish refugees was that they were a threat to wages and working conditions, in line with the government's stated reason for rejecting refugees due to concerns from workers. Over and over again the government stressed the fact that they would not let refugees impact negatively on workers. It was promised that 'only persons who will not disturb existing labour conditions will be admitted',<sup>69</sup> and that entry would be limited 'to those who would not compete with unskilled Australian workmen'.<sup>70</sup> Menzies again reiterated this position on taking over government, vowing he 'would not tolerate any attempt by foreigners... to break down cherished Australian standards of living'.<sup>71</sup> Jewish refugees were also presented as posing a possible threat to morals and the community. As such, the government promised to forbid 'an undue aggregation of aliens' and to ensure that 'every refugee will have to be desirable as an individual and of good character and health'.<sup>72</sup> That other migrants were not spoken of in this way again shows the racial basis of this vilification. It can hardly be thought that all these protestations decreased concerns about the refugees' impact. Rather, each statement reinforced the idea that they were a threat which must be guarded against.

Once the quota had been announced, the government mainly responded to the negative statements others made. However, this does not indicate that the process of official vilification of Jews was at an end, but only that a new tactic which reinforced the perceptions of the government as 'reasonable' was in place. Rather than strongly countering fears which presented themselves, dismissing them as baseless, the government took racist suggestions seriously, indicating they would take action to stamp out the 'threat'. Once more, the only response to claims that refugees were taking work from Australians was that precautions were being taken to prevent this, including monitoring refugees already in Australia.<sup>73</sup> After Victorian parliamentarian Sir Frank Clarke disparaged the physical fitness of refugees, the government's only response was that refugees were given two medical examinations, legitimating fears of contamination rather than attacking the blatantly racist basis of Clarke's accusations.<sup>74</sup>

It must be emphasised that this characterisation of the refugees was nonsensical, even on the government's own terms. When the government inquired into allegations of refugees working below award wages, they were found to be false or insignificant.<sup>75</sup> In one case, the matter was found to have been resolved by the union itself, by simply recruiting the

refugee concerned, who then worked at the normal union rates. Likewise, the government's own investigations showed claims of 'sweating' by Jewish employers was baseless.<sup>76</sup> Such results were not widely publicised, and were not used to refute allegations such as those outlined above. On one occasion the results of an inquiry were announced the same day as yet more 'safeguards' were introduced to protect workers.<sup>77</sup> Indeed privately McEwen acknowledged that, if admitted, most refugees would be able to establish businesses or find employment. He cited Australia's previous absorption of up to 50,000 immigrants a year and acknowledged that unemployment was now 'low' at 8%.<sup>78</sup> The government could have continued to 'sell' a policy of substantial aid to the refugees along these lines, which, as we will see, was the case for other immigrants. Instead, they deliberately chose to initiate a policy which was not only racist, but served to encourage and coalesce racism in the community.

The preceding analysis of the function of refugee policy in shaping public opinion provides the basis for a new conclusion as to the government's motivations. It is possible that grand political strategy was a consideration. Many conservative politicians saw Communism as a greater threat than fascism at this time, as Rutland points out<sup>79</sup>. As we have seen, the major forces which could have been mobilised in favour of the refugees were on the political left and the Lyons' UAP government was unlikely even to have encouraged moderate trade union support for refugees. Hostility towards refugees also fitted with the Lyons government's support for appeasement of Hitler.<sup>80</sup> The relative importance of appeasement and anti-communism in government thinking on refugees is hard to judge. However there is no archival evidence suggesting it was a major concern. Moreover, by itself it would not explain why refugees were scapegoated as they were *within* Australia, or why the policy was not liberalised as disillusionment with appeasement increased late in 1938.<sup>81</sup>

A fuller explanation can be found by seeing that encouraging racism suited the government's wider agenda on immigration. This was not necessarily a deliberate plot or conspiracy on the part of the government. Even if it was, there is unlikely to be any record of decisions left for the historian. It is more likely that such actions simply suited the overall program of the government. The 1930s saw a strong drive for higher population levels for defense and economic benefits, including from the Lyons government. This essentially meant that the government had to financially back migrants from distant Europe. The difficulty of attracting British migrants meant that by the end of the 1930s the government was prepared to accept 'racial' groups further down the perceived hierarchy of desirability, particularly focusing on the Dutch.<sup>82</sup> British and Northern Europeans were actively sought as emigrants. While publications such as the *Bulletin* were much more favourable to immigration which they saw as racially acceptable, the organised labour

movement was clearly not favourable to immigration of any kind. The *Worker* ran a major campaign on this issue throughout the first half of 1938, reflecting concerns in the union movement. Crucially, these articles generally do not oppose immigration from a specific region, but immigration in general.<sup>83</sup> This dissatisfaction transferred itself to Labor members in federal parliament, who spoke against increased general immigration throughout 1938.<sup>84</sup> The humanitarian stance shown by some in Labor towards the refugees was entirely lacking in this case.

However, the government did not back away from its plans. One departmental memorandum argues that refugees must be excluded so that absorptive capacity will not be taken from Northern European migrants.<sup>85</sup> In other words, Northern Europeans were also viewed as having a possibly negative impact on the labour market, but this was never publicised. As with refugees, the government did insist that assisted immigration would not adversely affect workers. But this was done by emphasising the role of immigration in economic development, and the policy's benefits were widely publicised up to the outbreak of war. Problems of unemployment were dismissed, and the Deputy Minister for the Interior claimed that even the arrival of 10,000 migrants a year, all of whom became unemployed, would only raise unemployment by 0.15%.<sup>86</sup> Dutch and Danish migrants were 'solid types', with 'special knowledge'.<sup>87</sup> The policy was also defended in parliament.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, cabinet itself thought the impact of Northern European workers so unimportant that they permanently gave discretion to McEwen to set levels as he saw fit.<sup>89</sup>

These same arguments could have been used to support a significant intake of Jewish refugees. Instead, the refugees were used as a lightning rod to distract the attention of those who would oppose their wider immigration policies. Markus argues that post-war Jewish migration was limited to secure support for wider immigration.<sup>90</sup> But the contention here is that Jewish refugees were categorised as undesirable aliens in order to pro-actively secure immigration *before* the war. For surely any government which was so tough on Jews, because of their potential impact on workers, would not allow other migrants to take jobs and disrupt society? For such a manoeuvre to work, the refugees had to be made to seem a threat, despite realities. It is possible that the quota's announcement was delayed in order to allow fears of Jewish refugees to grow, a process which, as we have seen, the government encouraged. Racial stereotyping also made Northern European migrants seem more desirable in themselves; not only would such migrants bring positive benefits, but also they would not disrupt current Australian patterns of life. These people were as white and civilised as native Australians, 'shoulders to bear [the] load' of 'building a stronger nation'.<sup>91</sup> The Australian public were presented with Eastern European Jews as the negative image against which to contrast a homogenised 'Aryan' collectivity. Such blatant racial thinking would not have been acceptable at the time, but

this is the subtext of the government's policy and publicity. It is possible that the benefits of publicising the refugee issue in this way only became fully apparent after the initial policy of the quota was set. However, it is clear that from the time that the initial quota was set in June 1938, cabinet was aware of the link between refugees and wider immigration. McEwen admits that the policy amounts to 'discrimination against a particular race,' but that a government with an immigration platform must be 'selective'.<sup>92</sup> On the surface, McEwen seems to be saying that the disturbances caused by refugees would jeopardise wider immigration, but in the light of our other evidence, his statement has much more significant undertones.

Any assessment of the success of this policy must necessarily be cautious. That Jewish people were again vilified and became less popular in Australia is obvious. Widespread opposition to Northern European immigration did not arise, although the extent to which this was due to the government's campaign is not clear. World War II imposed a lengthy pause on plans for population increase, and thus prevents a full analysis of the workings of the government's publicity campaign. However, some measure of the success of the policy can be seen in the way the press reported the two issues. The racist sections of the press were content with attacking the Jews rather than wider immigration policy. More importantly the major dailies often linked the two issues together. At times, stories about the 'problems' with Jewish refugees were even run in the same column as news about the desirability of Northern Europeans. The headline 'Migration Need: Dutch Farmers Suggested' ran a few paragraphs above 'Alien Migrants: Effect on Australian Standards', a by now familiar story about the government's efforts to monitor refugees.<sup>93</sup>

Obviously, the government could not determine the way newspapers laid out their stories, and things did not always work out this conveniently. But it does reveal that the government had successfully contrasted refugees with planned immigration in the public imagination; one was suspicious, the other praiseworthy, and the government determined which was which. Of course, the relative animosity shown towards refugees compared to British and Northern European migrants was not simply a creation of the government; these differences in opinion certainly already existed in the Australian community. Once again, the effects of the publicity campaign were to draw out and emphasise the strands in an ambiguous public opinion. There is some evidence that this did affect the union movement. By the time of its conference in February 1939, the AWU, whose newspaper had so strongly opposed British immigration, voted against further intakes of refugees, while the wider immigration policy was not mentioned.<sup>94</sup>

While these conclusions must remain cautious, what has become clear is the extent to which the government was responsible for creating a racist discourse. Racism is a dynamic

force, which must continually be reconstructed to fit prevailing conditions, and be introduced to new generations. The issue of Jewish refugees was a point at which latent ideas about anti-Semitism and assimilation of other cultures could either be challenged or accepted anew. Public opinion was not entrenched or homogenised, allowing the government substantial room for manoeuvre. However, it chose to apply a racially based policy, which was publicly justified through a process based on racial categorisation. Therefore, far from being a passive reflector of racism, the government shaped and reinforced existing strands of Australian racial thinking. This was done through administrative policies which supposedly served the national interest by protecting Australian workers, but in which reality aided plans for economic development advocated by capital. This episode is therefore an example of the way in which racist practice and discourse is shaped and driven by the workings of class society, mediated through the short-term interests of the state.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933-1948*, (Croom Helm Australia Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1985.), p. 97.
- <sup>2</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9 1938, p. 17.
- <sup>3</sup> See Rutland, Suzanne Rutland, 'Australian Government Policies to Refugee Migration 1933-1939', in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 69, Part 4, 1984, pp. 224-6.
- <sup>4</sup> See Beverly Hooper, 'Australian Reactions to German Persecution of the Jews and Refugee Immigration, 1933-1947', MA Thesis, Australian National University, 1972, p. 88.
- <sup>5</sup> Suzanne Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, (William Collines Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1988.), p. 177. Michele Langfield, 'To Restore British Migration: Australian Population Debates in the 1930s', in *The Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 1995, p. 411.
- <sup>6</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 90.
- <sup>7</sup> NAA A445 235/5/4, Cabinet agenda number 215.
- <sup>8</sup> McEwen to House of Representatives, CPD vol. 158, 1 December 1938, p. 2535. Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p.47.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Markus, 'Jewish Migration to Australia 1938-49', in *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 13, November 1983 'Jewish immigration', p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup> See Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, pp. 158-9 and Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 184
- <sup>11</sup> NAA A433, 1943/2/46, 9 March 1939, memorandum from Lyons to High Commissioner J.S. Duncan (acting).
- <sup>12</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 244.
- <sup>13</sup> Paul Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust, 1933-45*, (Australian Scholarly Publishing, Kew, Victoria, 1994.), pp. 129-30 and 245.
- <sup>14</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 63. On more widespread anti-Semitism, see Blakeney chapters 1 and 3.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Bartrop, 'Good Jews' and 'Bad Jews': Australian perceptions of Jewish migrants and refugees, 1919-1939', in W.D. Rubinstein, (ed.) *Jews in the Sixth Continent*, (Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1987.)
- <sup>17</sup> For example Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust*, p. 248, Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, pp. 161-2.
- <sup>18</sup> For example D.J. Benjamin, 'Australia and the Evian Conference', in *Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 5, Part 5, July 1961, pp. 215-233 and Hilary Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia*, Volume 1, (William Heinemann Australia, Port Melbourne, 1991.), p. 180.
- <sup>19</sup> W.D. Rubinstein, 'Australia and the Refugee Jews of Europe, 1933-1954: A Dissenting View', in *Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 10, Part 6, May 1989, pp. 181-2.
- <sup>20</sup> For Calwell's explicit argument of why Australians must put aside their traditional racial prejudices, see Arthur Calwell, *How Many Australians Tomorrow?* (Reed & Harris, Melbourne, 1945.), especially pp. 46-51.
- <sup>21</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1938, p. 6, and 2 November 1938, p. 6.
- <sup>22</sup> *Herald Sun*, October 14, 1938, p. 6. Significantly, this editorial was printed at the same time as the quota system was being floated in response to rumours of shiploads of refugees preparing to leave Europe.
- <sup>23</sup> As well as those publications already mentioned, see the *West Australian*, December 2 1939, p. 27 and *Courier Mail*, December 2 1939, p. 6.
- <sup>24</sup> Examples can be found in the *Bulletin* July 27 1938 p. 12 and November 23 1938, p. 12, and *Truth* (Melbourne) November 12 1938, p. 1 and November 19, 1938, p. 10.
- <sup>25</sup> On the circulation of the major dailies see E.M. Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia*, (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970.), p. 20.

- <sup>26</sup> Michael Blakeney, 'Australia and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Government Policy 1933-1939', in Arnold Paucher, (ed.) *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book: Volume 29*, (Secker and Warburg, London, 1984.), p. 130.
- <sup>27</sup> NAA A445/1, 235/5/6.
- <sup>28</sup> See Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 184. For an excellent personal account, see Emery Barcs, *Backyard of Mars: Memoirs of the 'Reffo' Period in Australia*, (Wildcat Press, Sydney, 1980.)
- <sup>29</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 6, p. 13.
- <sup>30</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 211 and Hooper, pp. 67-9, both discuss community support for the refugees, although they emphasise that it was outweighed by criticism.
- <sup>31</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 14 1938, p. 10.
- <sup>32</sup> NAA A461/8, M349/3/5 PART 2, and NAA A461/9, U349/3/5.
- <sup>33</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, February 3, 1939, p. 1.
- <sup>34</sup> For example see *Sydney Morning Herald* July 28 1938, p. 13 June 20 1939, p. 11, June 28 1939, p. 16, July 5 1939, p.17 and *Daily Telegraph* January 9 1939, p. 5.
- <sup>35</sup> Stuart McIntyre, *The Reds*, (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998.), p. 310 and Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 211.
- <sup>36</sup> David Rose, 'The Movement Against War and Fascism, 1933-1939', in *Labour History*, No. 38, May, 1980, pp. 78-9, and Len Fox, 'The Movement Against War and Fascism: A View From Inside', in *Labour History*, No. 39, November, 1980, pp. 78-82.
- <sup>37</sup> See Suzanne Rutland, 'Australian Responses to Jewish Refugee Migration Before and After World War II', in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1985, p. 37, Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, 222-9, Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, pp. 184-7.
- <sup>38</sup> Examined more fully below.
- <sup>39</sup> The government's presentation of the issue is discussed in detail below.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Worker*, November 9 1938, pp. 7 and 11.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Worker* February 10 1939, p. 10
- <sup>42</sup> *The Worker* November 23 1938, p. 14 and *Labor Daily* November 19 1938, p. 2.
- <sup>43</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* January 6 1939, p. 8, March 10 1939, p.11, *The Worker*, March 22 1939, p. 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Evidence of this was provided by the government's own investigations, NAA A367/C30751, 7. Oct. 38. memorandum for the secretary of the Department of the Interior, from H.E. Jones. See also Blakeney, p. 188.
- <sup>45</sup> For example see *The Worker*, December 14 1938, p. 1.
- <sup>46</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 18 1939, p. 11.
- <sup>47</sup> Apart from *The Worker* already cited see *Sydney Morning Herald* November 2 1938, p. 16. On a debate in the AWU which eventually voted against admission of refugees, see *The Worker* March 29 1939, p. 19.
- <sup>48</sup> Andrews, pp. 3-5.
- <sup>49</sup> See H.I London,. *Non-White Immigration and the 'White Australia' Policy*, (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1970.), pp. 146-7.
- <sup>50</sup> See Bartrop, 'Good Jews and Bad Jews'.
- <sup>51</sup> Hooper, p. 56.
- <sup>52</sup> Paul Bartrop, 'Not a Problem for Australia': The Kristallnacht viewed from the Commonwealth, November 1938', in *Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 10, Part 6, May 1989, p. 490.
- <sup>53</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 79.
- <sup>54</sup> Blakeney, the most careful historian of the period, acknowledges the difficulty of assessing the cause and effect of public policy and public opinion. However, he does not go on to explore the government's role in opinion shaping. See Blakeney, 'Australia and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Government Policy 1936-1986', p. 130.

<sup>55</sup> See Paul Bartrop, 'The Australian Government's 'Liberalisation' of Refugee Immigration Policy in 1938: Fact or Myth?', in *Menorah*, Vol. 2, No. 1, June, 1988.

<sup>56</sup> Rutland, 'Australian Government Policies to Refugee Migration 1933-1939', p. 230. See also H Rubinstein, p. 167.

<sup>57</sup> For example *The Argus* October 6 1938, p. 3, *Sydney Morning Herald* October 25 1938, p. 12, *West Australian*, November 23 1938, p. 19, *Daily Telegraph*, December 3 1939, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> CPD vol. 158, p. 2535, 1 December 1938.

<sup>59</sup> *Bulletin* December 7 1938, p. 13 and December 21 1938, p. 12. *West Australian*, December 2 1938, p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Anne Andgel, *Fifty Years of Caring: The History of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, 1936-1986*, (The Australian Jewish Welfare Society and The Australian Jewish History Society, Sydney, 1988.), pp. 5-6.

<sup>61</sup> See H. Rubinstein, p. 169, although her interpretation of this situation are quite different.

<sup>62</sup> Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, pp. 151-55.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see *Daily Telegraph* October 14 1938, p. 5, *Sydney Morning Herald* November 2 1938, p. 16 and *Daily Telegraph* February 3 1939, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> See amongst others *Daily Telegraph* October 6 1928, p. 2, October 25 1938, p. 8, *The Herald* October 6 1938, p. 17 *Courier Mail* October 6 1938, *Sydney Morning Herald* November 23 1938, p. 17, and *West Australian* November 23, p. 19,

<sup>65</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* October 25 1939, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* December 2 1938, *West Australian* December 2 1938, p. 27 and *Courier Mail*, December 2 1938 p. 6 all reported the government position. *Sydney Truth*, December 4 1938, p. 22 played up the necessity of the quota to protect workers.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Telegraph*., December 6 1938, p. 5, December 3 1938, p. 6 and February 8 1939, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> This characterisation began as early as November. See the *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 3 1938, p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* December 2 1938, p. 11

<sup>70</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 8 1939, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* May 16, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> *West Australian* December 2 1938, p. 27.

<sup>73</sup> See for example *Daily Telegraph*, March 8 1939, April 13 1939, p. 5 *Sydney Morning Herald* May 2 1939 p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> For Clarke's allegations, see *The Age*, 9 May 1939, p. 11. The government's response is reported in the *Argus*, 10 May 1939, p. 2 and *Sydney Morning Herald* May 10 1939, p. 20.

<sup>75</sup> NAA A461/9, Z349/3/5, 7/2/39, letter from Attorney General's Department Investigation Branch to the Director, CIB, 7/2/39. NAA A432/85, 1938/1425, whole file.

<sup>76</sup> NAA A433/1, 1939/2/909, 31/5/39. report by Roland S. Browne, for Director CIB. This was again found in January 1940.

<sup>77</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* April 15 1939, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> NAA A2694/XM vol. 18, part 4, 9.6.38. Cabinet agenda 215.

<sup>79</sup> Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, p. 197.

<sup>80</sup> See Kate White, *Joseph Lyons*, (Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Melbourne, 2000 [1987]), p. 176, P.G. Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: the Making of Australian Foreign Policy, 1901-1949*, (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983.), p. 100 and Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees*, p. 48.

<sup>81</sup> Andrews, pp. 155-61.

<sup>82</sup> Langfield, pp. 408-411.

<sup>83</sup> Amongst others see *The Worker* January 12, p. 13, January 19, p. 11, February 23 p. 11, March 9 p. 15, March 16, p. 1, March 23, p. 20, April 13, p. 13 20, May 11, p. 11 and June 22, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see CPD 5 vol. 157, October 1938, pp. 368-9, and vol. 157, 2 November 1938, pp. 1144-1145.

<sup>85</sup> NAA A433, 1943/2/46 24/11/38. Memorandum to minister from departmental secretary Curruthers.

<sup>86</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* July 13 1938, p. 12. See also *Sydney Morning Herald* April 6 1939, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Daily Telegraph* September 13 1938, p. 7 and *Daily Telegraph* January 27 1939, p. 7. See also *Daily Telegraph* October 11 1938, p. 7 and *Sydney Morning Herald* January 11 1939, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> For example see CPD vol. 157,5 October 1938, p. 364 and vol. 158, December 2 1938, p. 2627.

<sup>89</sup> NAA A2694/XM vol. 18 part 4. 9/6/38, agenda number 214.

<sup>90</sup> Markus, 'Jewish Migration', p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> From a broadcast by Lyons, reported *Sydney Morning Herald* March 29 1939, p. 17.

<sup>92</sup> A445, 235/5/4. 14.3.39. Draft memorandum for Cabinet from McEwen.

<sup>93</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* February 18 1939, p. 11. See also *Daily Telegraph* November 9 1938, p. 3, *Daily Telegraph* February 3 1939, p. 9 and the *Argus* March 9 1939, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> *The Worker* March 29 1939 p. 19 and April 5 1939, p. 17.