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# Asiatic Immigration into Australia

By PERSIA CAMPBELL, *Research Student.*

THE influence of Asiatic immigration on the course of Australian history—as a force both centripetal, strengthening the national sentiment, and centrifugal, weakening the imperial connection—is not generally appreciated. Yet only by an understanding of the historic circumstances of its development can such a national complex as the “White Australia” policy be explained. And whether justifiable or not, these deep-rooted prejudices will have to be reckoned with by any statesman who wills to establish relations between Eastern and Western civilizations on terms acceptable to both. It is a problem the solution of which is already urgent.

To fix the origin of the Federal movement in Australia is historically impossible. Yet it is certain that every attempt made before 1876 to institute a Federal Government was doomed to failure, lacking the vital impetus of a popular will. The Federation of jealous States can be effected only by the pressure of strong public opinion. But a pioneer community is intensely individualistic, and in it such opinion is not moulded by abstract ideas. Motifs for public action arise only when practical self-interests are immediately affected. It was not until the second definitely formative period of Australian history, 1876-1888, that the threatened subversion of their social order by a Chinese influx forced the Australian communities to concerted action, and emphasized the need of a political instrument for the realization of their common will. And also during that period they became more impatient of the limitations on their Sovereign rights imposed by a colonial status, as it was made manifest that their interests and the interests of Great Britain were not necessarily in accord. But British protection and therefore British Sovereignty remained an obvious necessity in their divided weakness. Union is strength, and strength is independence.

Chinese immigration was not a new phenomenon in 1876. During the 'Forties the colonial squattocracy, opposed to the unexpected demands of the English emigrants and dissatisfied with the assigned convict system, had introduced several hundreds of Chinese and Indian coolies as indentured labourers. During the gold discoveries these coolies or their “bosses” were probably responsible for the immigration of so many of their countrymen to the southern gold-fields that opposition was aroused, and restrictive legislation was passed by the Parliaments of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.<sup>1</sup> When the gold fever subsided, this legislation, so far as it was restrictive, was repealed.

<sup>1</sup> S.A., 1857; Victoria, 1855; N.S.W., 1861.

In 1875-6, however, the opening up of the Palmer Goldfields in northern Queensland proved an irresistible allurements to many of those Chinese reduced to an appalling misery by the Taeping rebellion and the subsequent disastrous floods. Before the end of 1876, Queensland miners found themselves surrounded by some 7,000 Asiatics—a group rapidly growing in numbers. The opposition of the miners was re-echoed by the Anti-Kanaka-labour party of Brisbane, until in August-September the “Gold Fields Bill” was introduced in the Queensland Assembly. The nominal object of the Bill was to compel Asiatic aliens to contribute an additional sum to the revenue in return for the protection they enjoyed on the Gold Fields, but its real object was to restrict their entry into the Northern State. They were already feared as an “economic danger.” But the economic interests of Great Britain in China had become too complex since the hypocritical Treaty of Friendship, 1860, to permit of a political rupture. Moreover, French and German rivalry in the Far East had already begun. Governor Cairns having therefore refused his assent to the Bill, the Agent-General in London was authorized to present it to Lord Carnarvon. The latter’s reply was determined by “treaty obligations.” “I may observe that although the fifth article of Peking especially refers to Chinese engaging to take service in the colonies and to giving them liberty to emigrate for that purpose, it is obvious that the article contemplates that all Chinese subjects should have full freedom of entry into British dominions without special restrictions or impediments.”<sup>1</sup> The interests of Queensland were to be subjected to the Treaty obligations, i.e., the commercial ambitions of Great Britain. The Agent-General said in reply, “As British subjects we value the privileges we possess, but if we are called on to sacrifice our hopes of perfecting a community founded on the principle of social and political equality, we are not content to do so without a most earnest effort to avert such a calamity.”

It was evident to the Premier of Queensland that the subject was one for the consideration of all the Australian Governments. But these latter were concerned with their local problems, and were not as yet vitally interested in the Chinese question. The circular letter to the Premiers was merely acknowledged by Tasmania. South Australia asked for further particulars. Victoria, under the masterly influence of Mr. Graham Berry, was “not unmindful of the grave national danger. . . . The rights and responsibilities of self-government as possessed by law should be jealously guarded”; N.S.W. was sympathetic and “prepared to support any well-devised and temperate measure.” Public opinion in the Southern States was as yet indifferent—the events of the next few years roused it to a tense hostility.

For in Queensland the Liberal Government, 1877, asserted the

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence read in the House: Chinese Immigration Bill, 1877. Also Herslet’s Treaties.

right of a community to control its immigration and passed the "Chinese Immigration Bill."<sup>1</sup> The right to limit the numbers of Chinese immigrants and to impose a poll-tax seemed to the Governor more plausible than the right to discriminate between European and Chinese miners. He gave his assent to the Bill. The inevitable result was that the tide of Chinese immigration turned to the Northern territory or the Eastern coast.

In the Southern States the Trade Union Movement, fearing unequal competition, organized to preserve the "standard of life." It is difficult to explain the immediate reaction of the mass of the Australian people to the fear of a Chinese influx without prefacing one's remarks by an account of the epic struggles of the Emigrant Fathers against the continued endeavours of the squatter-party to exclude them from that economic and political freedom they had come so far to seek. Such an account is impossible here. It must be enough to insist that hatred of squattocracy, of convictism, of indenture-systems, had left an indelible mark on the Australian consciousness.

The thirteen weeks' strike of the New Seamen's Union against the Asiatic Steam Navigation Co., which had proposed to secure coolie labour for the recently-opened service with the East, was successful, and led immediately to the first Inter-Colonial Trade Union Conference, 1879. When the failure of the Government of New South Wales, 1879, to force a Restriction Bill through the Council allowed the entry of some hundreds of Chinese,<sup>2</sup> a mass meeting of the "noisy section of the community" was held (April 26th, 1880) to institute an Anti-Chinese League. The Victorian Democrats agitated against political deterioration. In the debate on the "Chinese Voters Bill," 1880, Mr. Graham Berry maintained "There is nothing the people of this country desire more than to put a check on the influx of Chinese and their deterioration of the ballot." Unused to political privilege they seemed heedless of democratic progress. Liberal feeling was aroused by capitalist exploitation of "brute votes."

Hence the resolution for protective measures passed at the Premiers' Conference, December 1880-January 1881,<sup>3</sup> and forwarded to the Colonial Secretary, had a popular authority. The Premiers further protested against the action of the West Australian Council in introducing Chinese labour, ". . . a course so calculated to isolate her in the civilizing process." Before the close of 1881 all the States except Tasmania had restrictive barriers.<sup>4</sup>

A national consciousness was struggling into being. The very necessity of securing social continuity was developing a social

<sup>1</sup> Chinese immigrants were limited to one to every 10 tons shipping; £10 poll tax was also imposed.

<sup>2</sup> 1,406 were reported between January 18th-June 8th. *Vide* N.S.W. Hansard, 1881, Questions.

<sup>3</sup> Papers of Inter-colonial Conference, 1881.

<sup>4</sup> N.S.W. and Vic. : one Chinese to 100 tons, £10 poll tax; N.Z. and S.A. : one Chinese to 10 tons, £10 poll tax.

purpose. "In Australia the British race have before them an experiment in working out British institutions under circumstances more favourable than in any other part of Her Majesty's Dominions; . . . this new Empire must be united on terms of a just and enlightened equality," Mr. H. Parkes declared during his tour through the United States, 1882.<sup>1</sup>

But it must not be thought that these measures were unopposed even in Australia. There were still a great number of Anglo-Australians who regarded the Australian States as English counties. To them as to Mr. G. Reid "there is not the slightest doubt that the mere fact of Treaties of Friendship and Commerce . . . makes any measure of this kind a violation of the spirit if not the letter of those arrangements." And the Treaty obligation of Great Britain must be honoured. Again, the *Sydney Morning Herald* voiced the opinions of those on whom "the Cobden medal weighed heavily," for whom all protective measures were anathema. *Laissez-faire, Laissez-aller!* were not all men brothers? And finally there was a strong capitalist class which continued to demand cheap labour. They were influenced, too, by the possible value of China as a commercial market. In the South Australian Council they were sufficiently powerful to keep the Northern Territory open for the exploitation of cheap coolie labour.

Thus the Chinese issue was already grouping the Australian people into one or other of two as yet ill-defined classes. Those who continued to oppose restrictive legislation were, in the main, those who had a "British" consciousness. They became the advocates of Imperial Federation. Opposed to them were the "Young Australians," determined at all costs to protect their high "Standard of Life"; more and more aware of the necessity of Australian union; more and more determined that the future of the Empire should be that of a Britannic Alliance. It was the latter group that, during the intervening years, gathered to itself the strength that triumphed in 1888.

To explain the attitude of the Australian people in the crisis of 1888, the influence of public events, 1881-88, should be understood. That influence, complex though it was, has certainly been exaggerated. It is well to remember that local issues, such as Tariff Protection and Land Reforms, continually distracted attention from high politics. Moreover, the evidence does not seem to substantiate the view that the annexation of New Guinea by the Queensland Government, or the Monroe Doctrine in the Pacific, as set out in a resolution of the Inter-Colonial Conference, 1883, had much popular support. The facts were too remote. As an article of the *Bulletin*—a national paper of considerable influence in the 'Eighties—asserted, December 15th, 1883: "The people of Australia don't care a snap of the fingers about the annexation of New Guinea. Hadn't you better annex Australia first! . . . Is Great Britain to signify to the

<sup>1</sup> *Fifty Years in the Making of Australia.* H. Parkes.

world a prohibition against colonization in the South Pacific? . . . We do not believe the intelligence of Australia would endorse a proposition at once so arrogant, so narrow-minded, so cowardly." This extreme statement was probably an exaggeration also. But in so far as the Australian people cared about the subjects under discussion at the Conference, it was to protest against the intention of France to transport *récidivistes* to the Pacific Islands. This was the racial complex. The circumstances connected with the annexation of New Guinea are interesting, however, in so far as "British indifference" made northern capitalism aggressively national. It even rallied to a banner of independence. At the same time the Premier, Mr. Dalley, was responsible for an event, usually disregarded, but of no small importance in the growth of a national sentiment in N.S.W.—the offering, in a moment of poetic enthusiasm, of an expeditionary force for the Soudan campaign, 1885. This handful of men did more than capture a donkey: they introduced Democracy to Imperialism. Even the *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 7th, 1885, was forced to admit "there has been a decided reaction in feeling." The overwhelming defeat of Mr. Dalley, in the September elections, was in large part the measure of this disapproval. The terrifying appearance of the Russian bogey during the absence of the troops strengthened the antagonism to an Imperialist venture.

Yet, however one reckons the influence on Australian development of these events, considered independently, there can be no doubt that collectively they emphasized the weakness of Australia's defence. It was a difficult situation. The Young Democracy was essentially non-militaristic and non-imperialistic. Yet it was driven by circumstances to accept the naval proposals of the British Government discussed by the Australian Premiers at the first Inter-Colonial Conference, London, 1887.<sup>1</sup> The proposals were distinctly unpopular in the various State Legislatures. . . . "If we must have a navy, let it be a distinct Federal navy"; . . . "in the name of common-sense let us cherish the feeling that responsibility for the welfare of our land rests on ourselves. . . ." The Queensland Legislature rejected the Bill.<sup>2</sup> But in the Southern States the majority recognized the force of the one determining factor. "There is a great deal to be said for the people on the other side," Mr. G. Reid admitted, "but this is the conclusion at which I have arrived: the Great Powers of Europe are trying to get every inch of territory they can. If we had to march to Western Australia to face France or Germany, many would pray for the support of the backbone of a great nation." The agreement was only binding for ten years. In the meantime a Federal Constitution might be drafted—the Federal Council being, for all practical purposes, abortive.

Thus the temper of the Australian people had considerably

<sup>1</sup> Australian States were to pay the cost of maintenance of a number of British warships in the Australian seas.

<sup>2</sup> Accepted, 1891.

changed since 1881, when a crisis arose in that problem which stands out unique and sphinx-like in Australian history, "irritating and agitating all classes and operating in the most intense way on those least informed."

The partial defeat of the French in 1882 had given an enhanced prestige to the "awakening Empire" and veiled in a mysterious largeness the Marquis Tseng's attempt to organize a naval force. And, further, the visit in 1887 of General Wungho, Chinese Ambassador, in consequence of the report of the Investigation Committee of 1886, advising on the establishment of a Consulate-General in Australia, quickened the apprehension that the "peaceful invasion" was to take a new and systematic form. The annexation of Burmah offered new facilities for the obtaining of naturalization papers. In 1884 the Anti-Coolie League in Queensland had forced the Government to severer restrictive measures; in 1885 the seamen had been on strike with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company over the coolie question; during 1881-6, 3,103 Chinese<sup>1</sup> had entered Victoria; in Tasmania, 1887, the Victorian Bill, 1881, had been adopted; even the West Australian Government had agreed, 1886, to a protective barrier. The problem was already serious when the Colonial Secretary sent his circular note<sup>2</sup> enclosing the protest of the Chinese Ambassador in London (Leu Ta-jên) against "the exceptional and exceptionable laws which some of the Colonial Legislatures of Australia and the Dominions have at different times enacted against Chinese subjects." He "hopes that with a view to the elimination of any part of them which may be found at variance with Treaty obligations and International usage, Her Majesty's Government will be pleased to institute an inquiry. . . ." General Wungho had presented an adverse report against discriminating legislation obtaining in Australia and Canada. The replies forwarded to Lord Knutsford by the State Governors admitted of no misinterpretation. The recent success of the negotiations between the United States and Chinese Authorities to provide for the absolute exclusion of Chinese labourers from the States for twenty years emphasized the failure of the British Authorities to secure similar protection for the Australian people. "While these and other British colonies have no direct voice in the contracting of Treaties between the Empire and Foreign Powers, they are frequently affected by obligations imposed by them, and it is therefore not unreasonable to expect that, in such cases, efforts should be made by those on whom the exercise of that power devolves to watch over and conserve the right and interests of colonies more immediately interested."<sup>3</sup> Repeated telegrams attested the rising temper of the masses. But events did not await the convenience of the Colonial Office.

<sup>1</sup> C. 5448. No. 44.

<sup>2</sup> C. 5448 is a useful Blue Book on crisis 1888.

<sup>3</sup> C. 5448. No. 44.

At the end of January the Government Resident in the Northern Territory called attention to the exceptional influx of Chinese expected there. "I ventured to express the opinion that it appeared a very likely fact that the Chinese Government was privy to what was taking place in the Northern Territory" (Mr. H. Parkes to Premier, S.A.). The South Australian Parliament being in recess, the Government issued a proclamation imposing a £10 tax on all Chinese entering the Northern Territory, and declaring all Chinese ports infected. As a result the wretched immigrants were taken down the East Coast. The master of the s.s. *Afghan* proceeded to Port Phillip. On May 1st a public meeting in the Town Hall, Melbourne, had unanimously resolved on the necessity of £100 poll tax. On the arrival of the *Afghan*, a deputation, hastily appointed, urged the Premier to prevent the landing of any Chinese. There were some 268 of these latter on board. Apart from those carrying naturalization papers, many of which were forged, this was much in excess of the legal number. The master was told that if any Chinese landed he would have to pay the heavy fine he had incurred. He did not insist. The Premier had acted "strictly within the limits of the law." The *Afghan* made for Sydney harbour, and on the eve of its arrival two mass meetings held in the Town Hall were followed by a procession, the chief magistrate leading, to Parliament House. The Premier was bidden to assume the prerogative of Sovereignty. The immigrants were forbidden to land. "It was equivalent to an Act of Independence." All standing orders of the House were cancelled for the next day in order to obtain Parliament's indemnity "for all acts done by the Executive in connection with the Chinese immigrants." A panic measure limiting the number of Chinese immigrants to one for 500 tons shipping and imposing £100 poll-tax was passed in a single sitting. However, a writ of habeas corpus having been taken, the Supreme Court declared the Executive action illegal, and all Chinese holding exemption tickets were allowed ashore. There were no further demonstrations. Leu Ta-jên vehemently protested to Lord Salisbury against "the arbitrary and irregular proceedings of the Colonial Authorities." Idle protests. "In none of the Australian colonies would the artisans and labourers have sufficient power or influence to obtain restrictive legislation on this question if they were not aided by the conviction of a majority of the other members of the community that such legislation is necessary for its present and future welfare" (Attorney-General of Tasmania).<sup>1</sup> The proposal of the S.A. Premier that an Inter-Colonial Conference should be called to discuss the situation and devise, if possible, some policy which should be acceptable to the Chinese Authorities and themselves, was therefore welcomed by the Colonial Secretary. In this Conference "they have not overlooked the political and commercial interests of the Empire, nor the commercial interests

<sup>1</sup> C. 5448. Enclosure No. 70.



of the Colonies.<sup>1</sup> . . . The suggestion that any restrictions which are to be imposed should be of a general nature, so as to give power to exclude European and American emigrants, has been very carefully deliberated upon, but no scheme for giving effect to it has been found practicable." There was, nevertheless, a general desire to put no unnecessary obstacles in the way of Treaty negotiations, and while the limitation of one immigrant to 500 tons was accepted, the poll-tax was dropped. Except in Tasmania, the various legislatures accepted the principle of the amendment.<sup>2</sup>

Democracy had achieved its immediate purpose. The case taken before the Privy Council of Musgrave *versus* Ah Toy, in which Ah Toy sued the Controller of Customs in Melbourne for £1,000 damages, was lost by the Chinese. Lord Salisbury seemed to appreciate the situation, and on June 22nd, 1888, he wrote to Sir J. Walsham authorizing him "to place yourself without delay in communication with the Tsung li Yamên, and urge upon them that . . . the Chinese Government should adopt a course similar to that which they followed in the case of the U. States."<sup>3</sup> But nothing seems to have eventuated and the opportunity passed.

Already the exclusiveness of inter-State tariff barriers had proved an economic irritant. Parochialism was defeating its own ends. Now in the crisis the Australian people knew themselves. The hour seemed ripe for the word spoken by Mr. H. Parkes, at Tenterfield, October 25th, 1889: "The time has come when we should set about creating a great national Government." In 1891 a convention met and framed a Federal Constitution.

It was shelved. The bogies were dead. The drought and the strike had intervened. Everywhere were apparent public indifference, political impotence. Federation might have been postponed until forced by the necessity of immediate danger, had not two new factors developed a determining influence.

In the first place there was the growing power of Japan. The 1894 Treaties had given the people of the Rising Sun a new status. Japanese lovers could no longer hang their verses on the cherry-blossom branches—they were busy with the instruments of "progress." Bent on economic development, hundreds of them were reported (1895) as immigrating to Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Government Resident in the territory declared "they will soon change the character of our maritime population." They were said to be monopolizing the pearl fisheries; offering cheap labour, they were entering the sugar plantations as labourers, and the towns as mechanics and merchants. They were feared as the Chinese were feared—only more so. The new "Japanese problem" was aggravated by the continued presence of some

<sup>1</sup> 1886. Total exports of States to China valued £16,000; imports from China, £846,000. C. 5448, No. 78.

<sup>2</sup> S.A. lowered the tonnage. As result Q. imposed a poll tax; it was vetoed.

<sup>3</sup> C. 5448, no. 85.

thirty thousand Chinese<sup>1</sup>; by the rapid immigration of Hindoos, and by the growing numbers of Kanakas who, freed from contract, were moving through the States in search of work. Women on the lonely inland were terrified; workmen in the towns were agitating. "There is no doubt the question has seized hold of the population to an extent unwarranted by facts." "I do not know a subject on which the feeling of the electors is more united or strong" (Mr. G. Reid, 1896). The resolution of the Premiers, who met in Conference, January-February, 1896, to discuss the terms of the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation signed by Great Britain and Japan (London, July 16th, and Tokio, August 25th, 1894),<sup>2</sup> was to be expected. The Chambers of Commerce urged acceptance of the Treaty in the interests of trade; the masses demanded its rejection for the security of opportunity. Instead of resolving on a commercial friendship it was agreed by all the states except Queensland that the terms of the Chinese Immigration Acts should be extended to include all Asiatics. The Capitalist Government of Queensland, triumphant since the Labour defeat, 1890-91, advanced the argument of the Tropics and decided on accepting the Treaty subject to a proviso permitting either party to regulate by law the immigration of labourers.<sup>3</sup> The Treaty was ratified as between Queensland and Japan, March 16th, 1897. Meanwhile the Governments of N.S.W. and S.A. accepted the Chinese Immigration Amendment Bill agreed upon at the Conference of Premiers. The Bills were vetoed by the Crown. The diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Japan were very different to those existing between Great Britain and China. Moreover, the restriction of Indians affected the unity of the Empire. At the Inter-Colonial Conference, London, 1897, Mr. Chamberlain proposed to tread the maze by a subterfuge: "We quite sympathize with the determination of the white inhabitants of these colonies which are in comparatively close proximity to hundreds of millions of Asiatics that there should not be an influx of people alien in civilization, alien in religion, alien in customs, whose influx moreover would most seriously interfere with the legitimate rights of the existing labour population . . . but we ask you also to bear in mind the traditions of the Empire which makes no distinction in favour of or against race or colour, and to exclude by reason of their colour or by reason of their race all Her Majesty's Indian subjects, or even all Asiatics, would be an act so offensive to those peoples that it would be most painful, I am quite certain, to Her Majesty to have to sanction it."<sup>4</sup> He proposed the acceptance of the principle of the language test adopted by Natal. The proposal was adopted in a Bill passed in Western Australia, 1897, and in N.S.W., 1898. It was discussed by S.A. and Victoria,

<sup>1</sup> At Census, 1911, 37,442 Asiatics in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Treaty 1894 was not binding on the self-governing Dominions unless separately accepted by them. Canada accepted it, 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Immigration of labourers regulated by a passport system.

<sup>4</sup> C. 8596, *Alien Immigration*.

but it had become obvious that the subject was one for a national, not state, legislature, and should be postponed until Federation.

Meanwhile the definite drafting of a new Federal Constitution was hastened by the second factor. Conservatism had discovered in the Federal project the opportunity of "a check to democratic progress." The conflict of political principles roused the Trade Unions to immediate activity—of the struggle was born the Federation of Australia. "We are, every one, members one of another" (Mr. Deakin).

"At this early period of our history we find ourselves confronted with difficulties which have not been occasioned by union, but to deal with which this union was established. Certainly no motive operated more powerfully in dissolving the technical and arbitrary political divisions which previously separated us." So Mr. Deakin spoke in the debates on the Commonwealth Immigration Bill introduced into the Federal Assembly, 1901-2. From 1877-1901 the principle adopted by the States in relation to Asiatic immigrants was one of restriction. From 1901 onwards that principle gave way to one of total exclusion effected by means of a language test. Japanese Consuls in Australia and Baron Hayashi, Japanese Ambassador in London, protested against "a measure which makes an educational test a means to discriminate between Japanese subjects in favour of other nationalities." But the Bill was assented to and with few amendments<sup>1</sup> still obtains. It embodies the "White Australia" policy.

In adopting the shibboleth "White Australia," the Australian people have been unjust to their own cause. It implies mere colour prejudice, and as such is resented by Asiatics and condemned by Europeans. But it is something much more fundamental. It is a policy that, rightly or wrongly, the Southern community has believed and still believes necessary for the security of its social life.

<sup>1</sup> Japanese students and merchants can enter the Commonwealth since 1906 on a passport system.