

2023 Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture

White Australia and the Labour Movement Phil Griffiths

The 2023 Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture was delivered by Dr Phil Griffiths.

Phil Griffiths began political life as a member of Students for a Democratic Society at Melbourne University, a draft resister, and a union activist in the AISF (insurance workers union), a forerunner of the FSU. In 1972 he began his life-long involvement in organised socialist politics in the Marxist Workers Group in Melbourne, and when the International Socialists was formed in 1975, became editor of its paper, *The Battler* for three years, then from the mid-1980s until 1994 he edited *The Socialist/Socialist Worker*.

In 1995 Phil returned part time to university, writing his honours thesis on “The decline of free trade in Australian politics, 1901-1909,” and from 1999-2006 his PhD thesis, “The making of White Australia: Ruling class agendas, 1876-1888”. During his Canberra years he co-convened the 2001 Labour History Conference and was also Convenor of the Refugee Action Committee.

From 2008-2021 he lectured in Political Economy at the University of Southern Queensland, and served on the Management Committee of the Brisbane Labour History Association and as a lead editor of the *Queensland Journal of Labour History*.

Along with his socialist journalism, he has also published a study of Australian attitudes to Japan, book chapters on inequality and racism, and a number of academic journal articles on aspects of the evolution of the White Australia policy.

He currently lives in Melbourne, where he is an active member of Solidarity, the socialist organisation, and is involved in the campaign against Aukus and Australian militarism.

The BLHA would like to thank Lachlan Hurse for video recording the lecture, and making it available online on YouTube at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT2-PusV6v8>

An audio recording of the lecture has also been published online at Solidarity’s podcast site:

<https://soundofsolidarity.podbean.com/e/white-australia-and-the-labour-movement/>



*Dr Phil Griffiths presenting the 2023 Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture
image c/o Lachlan Hurse*

There is an enduring myth about the White Australia policy; the myth that it was the creation of the Australian working class; that workers fought for it, imposed it on the ruling class, defended it and benefited from it.

John Howard summed it up in a speech titled ‘Politics and Patriotism’, which he gave in Melbourne in December 1995, shortly before the 1996 election, where he declared: ‘It was the Coalition which finally put an end to Labor’s White Australia policy.’¹

Up until the 1960s, the idea that the labour movement created the White Australia policy was the proud boast of most Labor politicians and many union leaders.

The movement against the Vietnam war—which necessarily confronted anti-Asian racism—and the wider anti-racist movement of the time sparked a whole new surge of interest in the origins of White Australia, but historians largely regurgitated the idea that it had been created by the labour movement. In 1985, Ann Curthoys summed this up:

A major issue in the 1960s and 1970s ... was whom to blame for its existence in the first place. The most common answer from historians had been the working class, the trade unions, and the Labor Party.²

But even the most cursory glance at the historical record shows

that from the Gold Rushes to the late 1880s, every single piece of legislation imposing racial discrimination and racial exclusion was passed by parliaments composed entirely, or almost entirely, of capitalists and their direct political representatives. There was no Labor Party, and virtually no union-backed MPs.

Then, the Immigration Restriction Act—which allowed the Customs authorities to exclude people on the basis of a dictation test—was written by Alfred Deakin, a bitter opponent of the Labor Party and strikes. The legislation was supported by every member of the bourgeois Protectionist Party (which had 33/75 MHRs) and most members of the official opposition, the right-wing Free Trade Party (with 26/75 MHRs). So whatever the Coalition put an end to, it was a policy made by their direct predecessors.³

Almost all historians acknowledge that all classes overwhelmingly supported White Australia, but no historian had ever seriously examined the class motives that led the vast majority of the Anglo-Australian ruling class to adopt White Australia.

This chasm in historical explanation was highlighted by Peter Corris in 1973:

If racialism was ... an ingredient in the thinking and behaviour of all Australians, regardless of class, right through the political spectrum, the present emphasis in discussion on working-class and radical racialism will be misleading to any attempt to understand racialism as a whole. What about the bosses?⁴

That is the question I set out to answer through two decades of research.

I concluded that three broad agendas led the large majority of the ruling class to fight for White Australia. Those three agendas were:

1. A concern that Chinese immigrants were a strategic threat to Anglo-Australian control of the continent.

The fear was sharpest about northern Australia, where there were only tiny numbers of 'white' settlers; and it was intensified in the mid-1880s when China was seen as a rising military power;

having resisted a French invasion of Taiwan.

Alongside those concerns was a fear that Britain would fail to protect the colonies from demands made by the Chinese government because China was widely seen as a crucial ally in Britain's global conflict with the Russian empire.

2. The determination of a large majority in the ruling class to build a modern, industrial economy, which could be threatened by allowing a regime of plantation agriculture to develop in the north, based on exploiting unfree labourers from the Pacific islands.

This concern was driven by theories of slavery and by the experience of the United States and especially the Civil War.

3. The final agenda was the desire to construct an homogeneous population.

This was seen as necessary for containing social discontent and creating space for bourgeois rule through parliamentary government.

This agenda was shaped by the arguments of John Stuart Mill, the

dominant political philosopher of mid-nineteenth century Britain and truly the theorist of White Australia.

Once I identified the significance of these three agendas, I discovered that the story of White Australia, the narrative of why and how we got it, was very different from all existing accounts, and I hope to tell a little of that alternative story.

Aboriginal people did not figure as important for the ruling class in these debates; they were overwhelmingly focused on the population the ruling class intended to engineer in the colonies.

None of this is to in any way seek to whitewash the history of racism within the labour movement. So, I will end up by reflecting on what I see as some of the key misunderstandings and mistakes made by even the best militants in the labour movement. While the greatest suffering was experienced by the people who were racialised, I want to also look at the price paid by so-called 'white' workers for accepting or embracing White Australia.

The Ruling Class Agendas behind White Australia

The three key agendas that led the majority of the ruling class to adopt the White Australia policy were:

1. Establishing strategic control of an incompletely colonised continent⁵

Most histories of White Australia begin with the gold rushes and the laws limiting Chinese immigration passed in Victoria, South Australia and NSW. But those laws were all repealed fairly quickly. In 1867 there were no laws in any of the colonies restricting the entry of Chinese people.⁶

The wave of legislation that led to the White Australia policy in 1901 began in Queensland in 1876, when parliament passed a new Goldfields Bill imposing higher licence fees on Chinese miners and businesspeople. Then in 1877 parliament passed the Chinese Immigrants Regulation Bill which limited the number of Chinese people who could enter Queensland by boat and imposed an entry tax of £10. This became the model for legislation later passed in other colonies.

There are a number of remarkable features about this legislation.

First: the parliament which passed these laws was dominated by squatters, sugar planters and their urban representatives and supporters, people who supported the ‘recruitment’ of Pacific Islanders for the sugar industry. Indeed, just a few years earlier, the Liberal government had tried to get Chinese workers for the pastoral and sugar industries.

The sudden shift in their position was in response to the arrival of large numbers of Chinese people to the Palmer River goldfields in the far north.

At the time, there were barely 200,000 settlers of European origin in Queensland and only a few thousand in the far north. As the number of Chinese miners in the north grew towards 10,000 and then past it, the ruling class became alarmed at the possibility that they could lose control of the north.

They started talking about Chinese immigration as an ‘invasion’. John Douglas, the Liberal Premier in 1877 said:



Harvest of Endurance: A History of the Chinese in Australia 1788–1988. Scene 3 - Violence against Chinese Miners. Copyright Australia China Friendship Society, National Museum of Australia. Photo: George Serras <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/harvest-of-endurance/scroll/violence-on-goldfields>

He did not hesitate to make use of the term ‘invasion’, for it really was an invasion, and as they were backed up by many millions of their countrymen ... a more dangerous invasion than any which they might be called upon to resist by armed effort.⁷

This rhetoric became a systematic theme in the speeches of ruling class politicians in the decades following.

Second: This attack on Chinese immigration was not a response to campaigning by the working class — there was hardly any labour

movement at all in Queensland in 1877 — nor a response to anti-Chinese violence on the goldfields.

What’s more, there had been minimal violence against Chinese miners on the goldfields since 1872. Organised attacks on Chinese miners resumed only after the press started hysterically attacking Chinese immigrants and after moves to start legislating against them.

So, the first threats of violence against Chinese people came in June 1875, after the first legislative moves against Chinese mining; the first serious physical attack came

in October 1876 when a crowd of whites fired on Chinese attempting to land at Trinity Bay, Cairns. This came after the passing of the first anti-Chinese laws in parliament with all the wild anti-Chinese rhetoric that involved.⁸

Third: the event that galvanised almost the whole of the Queensland ruling class behind racial exclusion was the action of the Imperial Government in London in vetoing the Goldfields Act passed in 1876 that imposed higher licence fees.

Lord Carnarvon, the British Colonial Secretary, declared that the Goldfields Act offended Britain's policy of open borders and contravened various treaties of peace and amity entered into between Britain and China, which gave the citizens of both powers the right to enter each other's territory.

The *Brisbane Courier* newspaper, then a serious and sophisticated publication, had rejected scaremongering about Chinese immigrants through 1876.

But two days after it found out that the Goldfields legislation had been vetoed, it accused the imperial government of 'assisting the Chinese invasion'.

'Australia cannot be both Chinese and British,' it wrote. 'Every Chinese immigrant ... by his presence amongst us, renders the colony less attractive to European immigrants.'⁹

In parliament the far right of the ruling class, the very richest men in the colonial parliaments, swung behind this argument.

Sir Arthur Palmer, the leader of Queensland's squatters, made it clear he was against 'filling the Northern portion of the colony with Chinese'.¹⁰ The immensely wealthy squatter, Joshua Peter Bell declared, 'No action in this matter could be too strong ... to prevent this country being inundated by Chinese.'¹¹

The obligations placed on the Australian colonies by the treaties with China would continue to be a sore point for the whole Australian ruling class. The co-ordinated legislation against Chinese immigration agreed to by the colonies in 1888 was sparked when the Chinese government complained about discriminatory legislation, and the imperial government in London demanded to know the reasons for it.

There was open speculation in the British and Australian press that Britain had a secret alliance with China in its global conflict with Russia, and that the Australian ruling classes couldn't trust the British to stand up for their interests in controlling Chinese immigration.

This was a nationalist response, but it was not an anti-imperialist nationalism; quite the opposite. Its aim was to more firmly secure the ability of the Anglo-Australian ruling class to control its territory and population within the wider British empire.

Many writers have explained the hostility to Asian immigrants as being a product of Australia being a colonial settler state, and I think that's broadly right. But there is an additional factor. Australia was and still is a relatively sparsely settled colonial settler state, and that has magnified that hostility.

This has also driven the Australian state's obsession with forward defence.

2. Opposition to a system of racialised exploitation¹²

The second great bourgeois agenda

that drove the White Australia policy was opposition to the widespread use of racialised indentured labour.

This was most eloquently summed up by the Tasmanian Attorney-General, Andrew Inglis-Clark, in 1888 when responding to the demand that the colonies explain the reasons for their anti-Chinese laws.

Inglis-Clark argued that if significant numbers of Chinese people came to the colonies, they would either threaten 'the supremacy of the present legislative and administrative authorities', or, if they accepted an inferior social or political status, they:

... would create a combined political and industrial division of society upon the basis of a racial distinction. This would inevitably produce in the majority of the remainder of the population a degraded estimate of manual labour similar to that which has always existed in those communities where African slavery has been permitted, and thereby call into existence a class similar in habit and character to the 'mean whites' of the Southern States of the

American Union before the Civil War. Societies so divided ... are doomed to certain deterioration.¹³

Note that Clark was *not* arguing that Chinese immigrants would undercut established wage levels for European labourers.

Instead, his argument rested on nearly a century of mainstream bourgeois critiques of slavery.

This bourgeois critique combined humanitarianism, evangelical moral individualism, and laissez-faire economics.

The greatest of all liberal, free-market advocates, Adam Smith, had argued that free labour led to a greater intensity of labour than slavery. John Stuart Mill agreed: 'Labour extorted by fear of punishment is inefficient and unproductive ... All processes carried on by slave labour are conducted in the rudest and most unimproved manner.'¹⁴

And JE Cairnes, author of one of the most widely read critiques of slavery, argued that because the slave's labour was so crude, it was 'quite impossible that he [sic] should take part with efficiency in

the difficult and delicate operations which most manufacturing and mechanical processes involve'.¹⁵

Let's pause here to note that this was an argument that slave-based production was insufficiently exploitative. This was not an argument grounded in the interests of either the workers in bondage or so-called free labourers.

For the ruling class, this was no abstract problem. Nearly 40 per cent of Australia's land mass is in the tropics, which start just north of Rockhampton, and most colonial politicians were convinced of the racist myth that 'white men' could not safely do manual labour in this climate.

They were left with the thought, terrible to many, that the only form of economic development that was possible involved plantation-based agriculture exploiting some group of indentured 'coloured' workers, which in turn raised in their minds the spectre of slavery and hence economic backwardness, moral corruption, aristocratic rule and social degeneration.

In north Queensland a large and growing sugar industry was being developed by kidnapping,

recruiting, and exploiting indentured Pacific Islanders.

For the urban and liberal bourgeoisie of both Queensland and the southern Australian colonies, this was — in the words of one Queensland Governor, Sir Anthony Musgrave — ‘a system ... as much like slavery and the slave trade as anything can well be’.¹⁶

The problem was that the sugar industry was driving colonisation of the north coast of Queensland and stimulating all kinds of capitalist industry — for instance in the manufacture of equipment — as well as producing housing, food, and other essentials for the ‘white’ population.

To shut it down would cripple Queensland’s colonisation; to allow it to grow would be to plant the seeds of a society divided by race and the terrible possibility of a future war between north and south.

The seriousness of it can be seen in a proposal made by NSW Premier, Henry Parkes, in 1879, to merge the three main southern colonies: New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, with Queensland deliberately excluded.

‘Her capabilities of soil and climate,’ he wrote, ‘so clearly mark her out for a colonising career dissimilar from that of her elder sisters.’¹⁷



A group of South Sea Islander women labourers on a sugar cane plantation near Cairns, Queensland, about 1895. c/o John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Neg 63220

The War over Plantation Agriculture in Queensland¹⁸

The issue of indentured labour on the sugar plantations unleashed the most bitter political struggle within the Queensland ruling class in the entire nineteenth century.

In the mid-1880s, as the sugar industry boomed, recruitment of Pacific Islanders became more difficult. The recruiters started turning back to kidnapping, while the planters—backed by the Conservative government—launched a campaign to get labourers from India, which was already providing plantation labour for other British colonies.

This became the central issue in the 1883 general election, in which the Conservatives were defeated.

When the planters responded to this defeat by recruiting Chinese labourers, the new Liberal government imposed tighter limits on Chinese immigration and legislated to allow the recruitment of European immigrants for long periods of indenture on wages far lower than standard.

This shows how little the opposition to racialised labour was

driven by the activities or interests of the labour movement.

The planters responded by launching a fight for the separation of North Queensland into a separate colony, one whose government they expected to dominate.

This broke the broad ruling class consensus which had tolerated the use of indentured Pacific Islanders.

In September 1886, the representatives of the Separation movement in the Queensland Parliament moved a motion for the division of the Colony.

They expected the motion to be defeated; but what they did not expect was that every non-northern politician, Conservative as well as Liberal, squatters as well as urban capitalists, voted against it.

Many of these had supported the sugar industry and its exploitation of racialised indentured workers. But they did not support anything which would reduce the size of Queensland's internal market; and more importantly, they did not support anything that would take Queensland down the American road.

The *Brisbane Courier* editorialised:

Political severance from the great bulk of the European population of Australia will intensify the social effect of the change [in population] ... the obvious effect of labourer and employer being separated by the broad bar of colour and race. A Northern aristocracy — a race aristocracy — will confront the Australian white democracy, and no strong effort of imagination is needed to picture the result ... a legacy of evil as that from which America only rid herself by the most terrible fratricidal war which the modern world has seen.¹⁹

Again, just to be clear, this was not an argument against all indentured racialised labour. It was an argument that this needed to be a minor part of the economy, one whose effects were restrained by the ‘democratic majority’.

The revival of Pacific Islander labour recruitment in the 1890s was consistent with this position; a desperate and brutal decision that lasted only until Federation allowed the wider Australian ruling class to terminate the labour trade — to the dismay of the planters.

This experience alone ought to explode the myth that the bulk of capitalists, or even pastoralists, wanted ‘cheap coloured labour’.

And it profoundly undermines the idea that the labour movement played some significant role in this prior to the 1890s. The weekly meeting of the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council held a few days after the motion for northern separation was moved in parliament did not even discuss separation, much less mobilise on the issue.²⁰

3. The construction of a supposedly homogeneous population²¹

We now come to the third major agenda behind the decision of the majority of the ruling class to adopt a White Australia policy: their belief that a free and democratic society needed to be culturally homogeneous; and that by threatening that homogeneity, people of colour — Chinese people, Pacific Islanders — would threaten freedom and parliamentary government in Australia.

This supposed need for an homogeneous population was a central theme in all the official memoranda sent by Australian colonial governments to London

in 1888 in response to Britain's demand that they justify their 'exceptional legislation' affecting Chinese people.

Earlier, in 1880, the conservative *Brisbane Courier* outlined the over-arching reasons for limiting the use of 'coloured labour':

It is not merely or mainly because white workmen dislike Polynesian labor that we are legislating to restrict it within as narrow bounds as possible. It is because we are all desirous of forming, as far as climate and the circumstances of the colony will allow, a homogenous community.²²

At one level, the idea that Chinese people could not become part of an Australian community is just pure racism, as is the idea that their very existence would be a threat to democracy.

But there was more involved. Colonial politicians were dealing with a serious issue for all ruling classes: how do we maintain control? How do we prevent the working class from becoming rebellious? How do we contain their discontent?

In arguing for a culturally homogeneous population, Australia's colonial politicians were drawing on ideas argued by Britain's leading political philosopher, John Stuart Mill.

In his book, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill argued that parliamentary government based on 'free institutions' was the best, most stable form of government. But like all societies it faced the danger of rival interests — including the working class — tearing society and the state apart.

To avoid this, 'free institutions' required racial homogeneity, a dominant nationalism and strong support for law and order.²³

Duncan (1973) notes that writings by Mill were obsessed with the danger posed by 'the ignorance and especially the selfishness and brutality of the mass'; 'the uncultivated herd who now compose the labouring masses'; and 'that source (*of*) animosity which is universal in this country towards the whole class of employers, in the whole class of employed.'²⁴

In such a society, universal suffrage

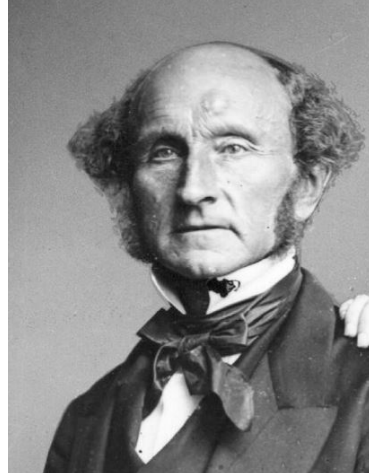
was dangerous; it may well produce 'a legislature reflecting exclusively the opinions and preferences of the most ignorant class'.²⁵

Mill is historically remembered as a leading liberal, and among other things that normally means a defender of the Enlightenment. But this potential threat to property led Mill to embrace some of the key political ideas of anti-liberal, anti-Enlightenment reactionaries such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle.

They wanted a return to the values of the Middle Ages. And they railed against the rising bourgeoisie, arguing its individualism, selfishness and laissez-faire would lead to the destruction of society.

While rejecting their attacks on liberal economics, Mill praised these reactionaries for identifying 'the three requisites which [are] essential principles of all permanent forms of social existence'.²⁶ These were:

- A system of education for citizens which aimed at teaching them to subordinate their own desires to the broader needs of society; a role played 'in modern



John Stuart Mill

c/o Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8443874>

nations ... principally by religious teaching.'

- A feeling of loyalty to some element of society's broad constitution, 'something which is settled, something permanent, and not to be called into question,' which enables society—ie capitalist exploitation—to weather the storms of internal dissension. This could be adherence to a common god or acceptance of an hereditary ruler or ruling class.

- Cohesion among the members of society, a sense of common feeling in some sense — and an attachment to the state or nation.²⁷

Thus, a stable parliamentary democracy was only possible where the ruling class was able to assert ideological hegemony over the population as a whole, and also strong institutions capable of making compromises between rival interests and enforcing these.

In this Mill rejected the democratic ideas of earlier thinkers, 'In which it was customary to claim representative democracy for England or France by arguments which would equally have proved it the only fit form of government for Bedouins or Malays.'²⁸

Thus, class hegemony and racism were fused in Mill: a racial idea of the nation became a means to contain class struggle and social strife at home.

Thus, it was neither in labourism, nor classical liberalism, but in the aristocratic anti-liberalism of the early nineteenth century that one of the principal intellectual foundations of the White Australia policy can be found: the idea of the homogeneous nation, protected by strong immigration laws against people who supposedly could not assimilate into a British culture.

In embracing racial exclusion, the labour movement was strengthening the ruling class's strategy of ideological domination over the working class.

There were, however, many problems with Mill's ideal of a homogeneous population. One of the most obvious was that no nation on earth was homogeneous. Britain and France themselves were multi-national, multi-ethnic states.

To deal with this, Mill promoted the idea of assimilation. But this would not be the intermixing of equals; he argued that stronger nationalities could absorb and transform weaker and more backward ones, and this would benefit humanity.

In an infamous passage he argued:

Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre ... to be a member of the French nationality ... than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander as members of the British nation.²⁹

This was the idea that the English 'race' had a unique power to assimilate the people of certain other societies.

In reality, the pursuit of homogeneity necessarily involved the oppression of minority language and cultural groups. It intensified social division around identity, the problem it claimed to be dealing with.

As a colonial settler state, the peopling of Australia had been a deliberate process, quite unlike the construction of European nations. Vast sums of money had been spent to attract immigrants; and parliaments, newspapers and the public debated the kind of people they wanted.

Most contentious were the Irish. They were easier to attract as immigrants and their labour was needed. But they came with potentially dangerous ideas: both Roman Catholicism, which was seen by the Protestant elite as an obstacle to progress, and a profound antipathy to British imperialism.

The tensions between Catholic and Protestant, between Irish nationalists and those who

identified with British imperialism, meant that no Australian nationalism that included the Irish could be described as 'English' or 'British'.

This is the real significance of the concept of a 'white' Australia: it was potentially inclusive of the Irish, as well as substantial numbers of northern European immigrants. It meant that an immigrant of Irish Catholic origin could identify with Australia and Australian nationalism while hating the empire to which the Australian state was committed.

Racial Exclusion and the Seafarers Strike of 1878-79³⁰

I would now like to show how this approach to the issue of racial exclusion can change the way we understand one of the key events in the making of White Australia, the famous Seafarers Strike of 1878-79. This was by far the largest industrial struggle before the great strikes of the 1890s.³¹

The dispute began in July 1878 when the ASN company, the largest shipping line in the Australia colonies, replaced 180 European sailors with Chinese workers. The sackings were initially fought

through a mass campaign against Chinese immigration.

When hundreds more European sailors were sacked on 18 November, the union then launched an all-out strike. Wharf labourers in Sydney refused to load and unload ASN ships, while coal miners in the Hunter and South Coast refused to cut coal for ASN steamers, paralysing most of the fleet. The company responded by recruiting hundreds more sailors from Hong Kong to use as strike breakers.

At the height of the strike, there were mass anti-Chinese riots in the city and regional centres, with Chinese people beaten and their shops and homes torched.

Historians such as Ann Curthoys have argued that the strike 'laid the basis... for the weakening of capital's interest in Chinese as a source of cheap, or even extra, labour' and that this was 'a precondition for the emergency of a nationally supported White Australia policy'.³²

I've already shown that most politicians who represented

capitalists large and small had no such interest in 1878 and that they were opposed to such a strategy.

With few exceptions, the mainstream newspapers strongly supported the seafarers. Let's start with the *Evening News*, Sydney's largest circulation newspaper. Its politics were Protestant, militantly free trade, pro-empire, pro-law and order. It was contemptuous of poor people and the Irish and saturated with racism. It ridiculed trade unionists and opposed strikes.

But this strike was different. 'This is a British colony,' it thundered, 'and we wish to maintain its essentially British character as the best heritage we can hand down to our children.'³³ Capitalists, it argued, had a duty to the nation and the race.³⁴

Right through regional NSW, most lesser papers agreed and many campaigned against ASN and in favour of the strikers.

Most of the argument that sees the ruling class as supporting the use of Chinese workers as cheap labour rests on opposition to the strike by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the leading capitalist newspaper,

and the refusal of the unelected members of the NSW Legislative Council to pass legislation limiting Chinese immigration.

First, the *Herald's* opposition to the strike was not grounded in support for Chinese immigration. For nearly a decade it ran the most appalling and dishonest 'exposes' vilifying Chinese people. Its editorials 'warned' of the 'special dangers' supposedly represented by Chinese immigrants. Just months before the dispute began, the President of the Seamen's Union praised the *Herald* for doing 'all it could to show what the colony would suffer if the 'yellow agony' were admitted into it'.³⁵

When the strike began the paper bitterly attacked the union on a class basis, arguing that the workers had broken their contracts of work.³⁶

When the strike was finally settled, it became even more fixated on the class dimensions of the issue, railing against the 'moral degradation' of people looking to the government for protection.

In 1879, in the wake of the strike, the Parkes government proposed legislation restricting Chinese

The seamen on strike are relying in a great measure upon the support and sympathy of the public. It is natural, under the circumstances, that they should be anxious to keep the Chinese question in the forefront of the controversy. But the public will be misled into a false judgment upon the situation if it should be studied simply in this aspect. What is the position in which the seamen have placed themselves? Are the tactics they have adopted such as to establish on their behalf a claim to public countenance and support? We have already pointed out that they have gone beyond the right to determine for themselves upon what terms they will work for the A. S. N. Company. No one will dispute that right now. No one will dispute their right to combine for the purpose of settling the terms of their work or service. But no one can judge the case fairly without recognising the fact that they have practically asserted a right to break an agreement deliberately entered into. They have thus struck a blow at that confidence between man and man which is at the foundation of all co-operation and of every commercial and industrial enterprise. Those who have advised them to do this, or are backing them up now that they have done it, cannot surely have perceived the tendency of their action. Society could scarcely exist in its present form without a general faith in the keeping of agreements; and, Chinese or no Chinese, the doctrine that people who have deliberately entered into contracts may as deliberately violate them without the consent of the other parties to the transaction, is the last that should receive any sanction in a city which depends for its prosperity upon the uninterrupted development of trade and commerce. ♦

Excerpt, *Sydney Morning Herald* (1842-1954)
Editorial, November 27 1878, p4
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page1433719>

immigration. In the Legislative Council there was not a single comment approving Chinese immigrants as 'cheap labour'. The majority addressed the ruling-class concern for strategic control and successful colonisation of the continent, and the idea that this would be threatened if Chinese immigration were not restricted.

Those who opposed the bill saw no immediate danger. Some of them also saw it as an attack on the principles of free trade. So much for the argument that capitalists in NSW had supported Chinese immigrants as cheap labour.

It was in Queensland where the press was most vociferous in supporting the seafarers' strike; and the Conservative papers were the most militant. The *Brisbane Courier* editorialised:

It is in this spirit we wish to express our regret at the action which the A.S.N. Company have seen fit to take, and which has led to the seamen's strike which our telegraphic correspondent describes. It appears that the company had taken steps to introduce secretly a number of Chinese sailors to the port of Sydney, with the intention of substituting them for Europeans in manning, or partly manning their vessels. This action the seamen promptly resented by a strike. As a rule strikes are bad things, partaking of the nature of the folly which children describe as quarrelling with one's bread and butter. But, if anything can justify a strike, and a general exhibition of public sympathy with the strikers, the step taken by the company would do so. The experience of every community in which Chinese have established themselves has been that their wholesale employment in one

As a rule strikes are bad things ... But, if anything can justify a strike, and a general exhibition of public sympathy with the strikers, the step taken by the company would do so.³⁷

And it argued that the growing military power of China justified the strike.

An anti-Chinese committee was organised in Brisbane, and it met, not at a trades hall, but in the rooms of the Brisbane Chamber of Commerce.

trade has led to their gradual encroachment on the white worker in every other handicraft. The Sydney seamen, in making their instant and decided protest, acted for themselves in the first instance; but also struck a blow for their fellow-workmen of every handicraft and the general community of wage earners. It is hardly necessary to repeat the well-known arguments on the subject. Summed up, they come to this: that the Chinese workman can undersell his European competitor, because he is content to live under conditions which the latter cannot accept without descending many steps in the ladder of humanity, and becoming unfit for the citizenship of a free State. We Australians—for in this matter we speak the conviction not of a colony, but of the continent—are agreed that it is better for us to have a community capable of the highest civilisation, even if we have to forego whatever advantage may be derived from the anti-like industry of the Chinese. The rights of individuals, employers and employed, have one admitted limit—the safety and welfare of the community; when that limit is threatened with infringement we are at liberty to take all lawful means to check it.

Excerpt, *Brisbane Courier* (1864-1933) Editorial,
November 20 1878, p2
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1376693>

They wanted public meetings called across the colony, so when it came to Ipswich, they wrote—not to the miners' union—but to William Ginn, a prominent Ipswich merchant and councillor. Ginn's own attitude to unions was made clear at the meeting in Ipswich.

Personally, he was not in favour of strikes ... They were injurious to the men themselves, to their employers, and to trade and their pernicious influences extended far beyond the immediate places in which they took place.³⁸

There was no record of local unionists or miners being involved in the meeting.

Their absence wasn't going to stop the hardy merchants of Ipswich. They called a meeting on the issue for Ipswich's coal miners. After traipsing out to 'a green near the Immigration Depot', the well-fed William Ginn met with indifference. The miners agreed only to invite the Brisbane seafarers to send a speaker to inform them of the facts of the matter. Many feared destitution if they took industrial action.³⁹

ASN was finally defeated when a ship bringing 350 Chinese workers sank in the Torres Strait and the Queensland Government stripped the company of its lucrative mail contract, as the Queensland conservatives had been demanding.

The Agendas that have Endured

I'd just like to sum up the argument so far. The policies of racial exclusion that we saw in the late nineteenth century, and which morphed into an explicit White Australia policy, were ruling class policies enacted for three primary reasons:

- to ensure their strategic control of the continent at a time when that control was either tenuous, or non-existent across vast areas of the north.
- to ensure that the economy was a modern capitalist economy, grounded in the exploitation of relatively skilled wage labour, rather than one in which the large-scale use of racialised, un-free labourers led to either economic stagnation, or even civil war.
- to buttress the system of parliamentary government by

maximising the illusion that the population was homogeneous, racially, and culturally, similar.

With the ending of indentured labour in the sugar industry, the deportation of many islanders and the agreement that the new Commonwealth would take over responsibility for the Northern Territory, the second agenda was essentially fulfilled.

The first and third remained key drivers of government policy well into the second half of the twentieth century.

So, for instance, the government set up a tax on sugar to fund the employment of as many white workers as possible in the sugar industry, which was mainly in North Queensland, for strategic reasons, which in turn required the industry to export most of its production. This was viable only because they received a subsidy paid by Australian workers on every kilo of sugar.

Today the government is still spending billions to develop and populate the north.

The third agenda also persisted. Right through the 1950s and into the 1960s, the Menzies government was defending White Australia to the newly independent governments of Asia on the basis that they were just ensuring the homogeneity and stability of their society, just as those new governments were attempting to do.

When the far-right ex-Labor politician Graeme Campbell argued against Asian immigration in the 1990s, he too quoted from John Stuart Mill to justify his racism.⁴⁰

Even today, assimilation remains a cornerstone of immigration policy, even if explicit racial homogeneity has been replaced by ‘multiculturalism’.

The Price Paid by Workers and the Labour Movement

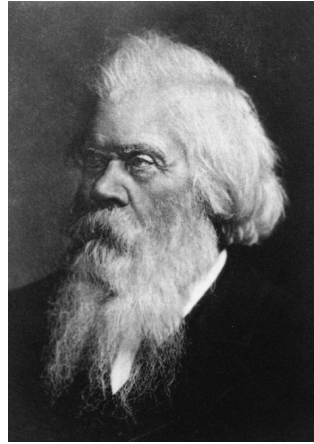
Support for racial exclusion led unions and workers to support their bosses against other workers.

Chinese workers were not slaves. They were accused of being an instrument that would allow the

rise of an aristocracy over the parliamentary system. That was not only racist, but profoundly wrong; Chinese workers fought for their rights and were just as willing to strike against their Chinese bosses as other groups of workers.

For instance: in Melbourne and Sydney, non-Chinese furniture workers were sucked into a campaign against Chinese-made furniture, a campaign that only strengthened their bosses; while the Chinese workers showed a willingness to take action against their bosses and looked for solidarity with non-Chinese workers, solidarity they didn't get.⁴¹

Some years ago, I did research to see if there was any relationship between Chinese immigration and wage levels, and found there was none. Chinese immigration never led to a fall in wages or living standards and, when Chinese immigration was stopped, there was no improvement in wages. Indeed, the greatest collapse in living standards ever in our history happened four years after the ending of Chinese immigration, as the 1880s boom collapsed into the Great Depression of the 1890s.⁴²



Henry Parkes, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Undated Negative number 195954

Racial exclusion allowed the enemies of the labour movement to be presented as the friends of the working class.

The classic example of this was the attitude of the movement towards Henry Parkes, the long-serving Premier of NSW. When Parkes pushed legislation restricting Chinese immigration through Parliament in 1888, the NSW Branch of the Seamen's Union passed a resolution assuring Parkes 'of his having earned the well wishes and admiration of the Ten Thousand Seamen composing this body'.⁴³

In reality Parkes was an enemy of

the working class and organised labour. Just a year earlier, amidst rising unemployment, he cut rations to all but the most destitute and used police to smash protest demonstrations.⁴⁴

In 1879, his government had responded to a miners' strike in the Hunter Valley by sending troops and artillery to intimidate the strikers.⁴⁵ And in 1888, just months after the Secretary of the Sydney Trades and Labor Council told Parkes that 'it behoves us to support them who support us', they did it again.⁴⁶

There are many similar examples. In 1888 many Queensland workers voted for the Conservatives, led by Sir Thomas McIlwraith, in the belief that the Liberals led by Griffith were soft on Chinese immigration. Two years later McIlwraith's government would round up the leaders of striking shearers and send them in chains to an island prison.

That political disorientation was partly driven by a populist view of the ruling class.

By that I mean the belief that one prominent, and particularly nasty,

section of the ruling class represents the class as a whole. The sugar planters and a minority of squatters might have been very rich but there was a wider ruling class that used the power of the state—and its influence over much of the media—to discipline them and pursue a different agenda.

In reality, the urban capitalist class was the most substantial economically and the dominant political factor: the merchants, financiers, construction capitalists, food manufacturers and breweries, equipment manufacturers, footwear and clothing capitalists and their hangers-on. To that we can add state capital: the railways, ports, and so on — all represented vast capital investments and they all wanted broad-based capitalist development. And many squatters and mining capitalists also wanted that.⁴⁷

That broader ruling class agenda was not hidden. Everything discussed in this presentation was openly canvassed in the newspapers and parliament.

This is a long-standing problem in the labour movement; attempting to find a section of the ruling class



Reflective of many illustrations throughout the English-speaking-world from the late 19th Century, this image from a National Union of Seamen (UK) newspaper of 27/06/1913 offers no working-class solidarity. *The Seaman* vol 1 no 18 - Chinamen on British Ships NUS Ref 175A-4-1-2-18 Warwick University Digital Collections

that is progressive because it has differences with other powerful sections of capital, whether they are banks (the money power), mining companies, multinationals not based in Australia, whatever.

This populist view of the ruling class facilitated the construction of a hegemonic ideology of Australian nationalism based on racism.

This was a nationalism that saw Australian society as white, as inclusive of the Irish and other European immigrants, rather than as narrowly English or British, and hence ultimately loyal to the British empire.

I won't dwell on this; it's been widely discussed by historians. But it is worth listening to the assessment of WG Spence, the famous, if conservative, organiser of the Shearers' Union. In his memoir, *Australia's Awakening* published in 1909, he argued that, where once republicanism had been a force in Australia:

The practical independence of government granted under the Australian Constitution, with the manifest advantages of being part of a big Empire and under its protection if need arose, together with the

growth of the national spirit of a 'White Australia' and the broad humanitarianism taught by the Labor Party, we have developed a feeling of loyalty to race rather than governments, but have abolished any talk of either republicanism or independence.⁴⁸

That ideology of loyalty to race drew the working class behind the pro-imperial and sub-imperial agendas of the Australian ruling class.

The idea that Asian peoples were poised to invade the country and threaten the livelihood of workers in Australia helped persuade many workers to accept conscription introduced by Labor in 1910 and to join the army with the outbreak of the bloodbath of 1914-18.

The Labor government at the time did everything they could to send as many young Australians as possible to the killing fields of Gallipoli and France. As far as they were concerned, the British Empire had to win the war, because Australian capitalism relied on British markets and investment, and relied on the Royal Navy for protection of its trade routes and its insecure grip on this vast land mass.

But just as importantly, they feared another power getting control of German colonies in the Pacific and, in particular, feared Japan's imperial ambitions. So Australian lives were sacrificed so that Australian sub-imperialism would directly control all of PNG, along with Nauru and Bougainville, and would dominate the rest of the south-western Pacific.⁴⁹

I am old enough to remember the way the government and the DLP persuaded many workers to support the Vietnam War by using images of the 'Asian hordes' descending on Australia, imagery straight out of White Australia propaganda of the 1880s and 1890s.

Conclusion

It was an historically important achievement for the earlier generation of activists and historians to insist that White Australia was racist, that it was not about defending living standards, and that racism had disfigured the labour movement. But they were wrong about who was responsible.

Getting to grips with the real history of White Australia doesn't just strengthen our ability to fight racism, which we must, but to

better understand the nature of the capitalist system, its state machine, its ideologies and the rival strategies of major capitalists.

This has been a rather dense talk on ruling class history. But isn't the

ruling class one of the major actors in labour history? Isn't a better understanding of them, as well as of our movement, essential for waging the class struggle today? And for transforming society tomorrow?

The argument in this lecture is made most comprehensively in Phil Griffiths, *The making of White Australia: Ruling class agendas, 1876-1888*, PhD thesis, ANU 2007, online at <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/47107>; also online at UQ Library (hereafter: Griffiths PhD thesis). Specific aspects of the argument made here have also been published, including:

Phil Griffiths, 'The strategic fears of the ruling class: the construction of Queensland's Chinese Immigrants Regulation Act of 1877', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-19

Phil Griffiths, 'The 'necessity' of a socially homogeneous population: the ruling class embraces racial exclusion', *Labour History* (Australia), no. 108, May 2015, pp. 123-44.

Phil Griffiths, "'This is a British colony': The Ruling Class Politics of the Seafarers' Strike, 1878-79", *Labour History* (Australia), no. 105, November 2013, pp. 131-51.

Phil Griffiths, 'The coolie labour crisis in colonial Queensland', in Diane Kirkby and Sophie Loy-Wilson (eds), *Labour history and the 'coolie question'*, *Labour History* no. 113, November 2017, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Haymarket, pp. 53-78.

This work was inspired by the early writings of Verity Burgmann, who I failed

to acknowledge in the presentation, and who made trenchant and convincing arguments against the idea that the working class could have been responsible for Australian racism, especially in 'Capital and labour', in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds), *Who are our enemies? Racism and the Australian working class*, Hale and Iremonger in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Neutral Bay (NSW), 1978, pp. 20-34; 'Comment: Who our enemies are: Andrew Markus and the baloney view of Australian racism', *Labour History*, no. 49, November 1985, pp. 97-101; and in 'Writing racism out of history', *Arena* [first series], no. 67, 1984, pp. 78-92.

Endnotes

¹John Howard, 'Politics and patriotism: A reflection on the national identity debate', speech given in Melbourne, 13 December 1995.

²Ann Curthoys, 'Racism and class in the nineteenth-century immigration debate', in Andrew Markus and MC Ricklefs (eds), *Surrender Australia? Essays in the study and uses of history: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian immigration*, George Allen & Unwin, North Sydney (NSW), 1985, p. 99.

³John Merritt argues that Arthur Bruce Smith (a leading member of the Free

Trade party) was the only opponent of the Immigration Act; in 'George Foster Pearce, Labour leader', MA thesis, UWA 1963, pp. 191-2. Smith's speech is at *CPD*, vol 4, pp 5153-67. Many other MPs spoke against aspects of the bill, and moved amendments, but when the final, Third Reading debate was concluded, there was no division in the House of Representatives, and no dissent recorded, see *CPD*, vol. 41, p. 5828. In the first federal parliaments, party divisions were much less clear and there are different estimates of party strength.

⁴Peter Corris, 'Racialism: The Australian experience', *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 15, no. 61, October 1973, pp. 754.

⁵This argument is made in full in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 97-136 and Griffiths, 'Strategic fears'.

⁶Myra Willard, *The history of the White Australia policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton (Vic), 1967 (first published 1923), p. 35.

⁷*Official Record of the Debates of the Legislative Assembly (ORDLA)*, Qld, vol. XXIII, p. 245.

⁸This is argued in detail in Griffiths PhD thesis, pp. 131-133, and in Griffiths, 'Strategic fears'.

⁹Editorial, *Brisbane Courier*, 31 March 1877; see also Griffiths PhD thesis, pp. 124-26.

¹⁰ORDLA, vol, XXIII, p. 248.

¹¹ORDLA, vol. XXIII, p. 250.

¹²This argument is made in full in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 137-89 and Griffiths, 'The "necessity" of a socially homogeneous population'.

¹³Memo from Andrew Inglis Clark to PO Fysh (Tasmanian Premier), dated 24 April 1888, NSW State Records, Col Sec special bundles 4/884.1. Clark's memorandum was regarded as sufficiently im-

portant for it to be published in *SMH* 15 May, 1888. The paper described it as 'exceedingly able'.

¹⁴Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, edited by Edwin Cannan, MA, LL.D., fifth edition, Methuen & Co, Ltd, London, 1930, vol. 1, book II, p. 297.

¹⁵Quoted in Richard William Fogel and Stanley L Engerman, *Time on the cross: The economics of American Negro slavery*, vol. 1 (of 2), Little Brown, Boston and Toronto, 1974, p. 187.

¹⁶Letter to Herbert, 3 Jan 1884. Musgrave's own copy is loosely inserted into the book of his private letters, Sir Anthony Musgrave's Private Letters, Oxley Library, Acc 334, tr 1863, A2/5/2.

¹⁷Henry Parkes, 'An Australian nation', *Melbourne Review*, no. 16, October 1879, p. 327.

¹⁸This section is argued in detail in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 293-347 and Griffiths, 'The coolie labour crisis'.

¹⁹*Brisbane Courier*, 21 August 1886, p. 4, col 6.

²⁰The weekly meetings of the TLC were reported in the *Brisbane Courier*, this meeting on 25 August 1886, p. 5, col 5.

²¹This section is argued in detail in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 191-253 and Griffiths, 'The "necessity" of a socially homogeneous population'.

²²*Brisbane Courier*, 19 October 1880, editorial p. 2.

²³John Stuart Mill, *On liberty and Considerations on representative government*, edited with an introduction by RB McCallum, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1946, p. 292.

²⁴Quoted in Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill: Two views of social conflict and social harmony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 1973, p. 227.

²⁵Quoted in Duncan, p. 228.

²⁶John Stuart Mill, 'Coleridge' in *Essays on ethics, religion and society, Volume X, Collected works of John Stuart Mill*, University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Toronto and London, 1969, p. 138-39.

²⁷Mill, 'Coleridge', pp. 133-36.

²⁸Mill, On liberty and Considerations, p. 130.

²⁹John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on representative government*, Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1958, p. 234.

³⁰This section is argued in detail in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 349-87 and Griffiths, "'This is a British colony?'"

³¹The strike has been discussed in every major book treatment of the White Australia policy. The most significant stand-alone account is Ann Curthoys, 'Conflict and consensus: The seamen's strike of 1878' in Curthoys and Markus (eds), *Who are our enemies?*, pp. 48-65.

³²Curthoys, 'Conflict and consensus', p. 65.

³³*Evening News*, Sydney, 19 Nov 1878, p. 2, col. 2.

³⁴*Evening News*, Sydney, 26 Dec 1878, p. 4, col. 3.

³⁵*SMH*, 24 July 1878, p. 3, col. 6.

³⁶*SMH*, 21 Nov 1878, p. 4, cols. 5-6; 27 Nov 1878, p. 4, cols. 5-6.

³⁷*Brisbane Courier*, 20 Nov 1878, p. 2, cols. 3-4.

³⁸*Queensland Times (QT)*, Ipswich Qld, 19 Dec 1878.

³⁹*QT*, 21 Dec 1878.

⁴⁰Judith Brett, "John Howard, Pauline Hanson and the politics of grievance" in Geoffrey Gray and Christine Winter (eds), *The resurgence of racism: Howard, Hanson and the race debate*, Monash Publications in History, Clayton (Vic), 1997, p. 25.

⁴¹Andrew Markus, 'Divided We Fall: The Chinese and the Melbourne Furniture

Trade Union, 1870-1900',

Labour History, no. 26, March 1974, pp. 1-10; Peter Gibson, 'Voices of Sydney's Chinese furniture factory workers, 1890-1920', *Labour History*, no 112, May 2017, 99-117.

⁴²This work was a preliminary exploration and presented as a verbal conference paper, 'White Australia: Did the working class benefit?' presented to the 14th biennial Labour History Conference, University of Melbourne, 11-13 February 2015.

⁴³Letter from Davies to Parkes 23 May 1888, NSW State Records, Colonial Secretary's Special Bundles, 4/884.1.

⁴⁴TA Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia: From the first settlement in 1788 to the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901*, Macmillan of Australia, South Melbourne, 1969 (first published 1918), vol. 3, pp. 1445-50; *SMH* 9 Aug 1887, p. 4, col. 6.

⁴⁵*SMH* 22 Sept 1879, p. 5, col. 2; Robin Gollan, *The coalminers of New South Wales: A history of the union, 1860-1960*, Melbourne University Press in association with the Australian National University, Parkville (Vic), 1963, p. 60.

⁴⁶Letter 24 May 1888 to Parkes from Robert Boxall, Secretary Sydney Trades and Labour Council, Parkes corresp, Mitchell Library, A873, p. 485; Gollan, *The coalminers*, p. 75.

⁴⁷My argument about the nature of the colonial ruling classes is argued in detail in Griffiths, PhD thesis, pp. 61-76.

⁴⁸William Guthrie Spence, *Australia's awakening: Thirty years in the life of an Australian agitator*, The Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1909, pp. 148-49.

⁴⁹I cover some of that history in Phil Griffiths, 'Australian perceptions of Japan: a history of a racist phobia' in *Socialist Review*, Melbourne, No. 3, Summer 1990, pp. 15-30.