

# My Part in the Abolition of the "White Australia Policy"

Until the advent of computers (and my learning how to use them in the late 1990s), all my writing was done on a portable electric typewriter and no copies were kept. There is one exception and that is the letter to appear in this story.

As far as I am concerned, the letter shown here is the most significant of all the letters I have written over the years, as I now know it helped bring about the abolition of the "White Australia Policy".

I came across my "draft" copy and the last (I think) of the Immigration Minister's replies amongst some old papers and I have scanned and used the originals to show the authenticity of them, even if it does make them a little more difficult to read.

Although I addressed it to the then Prime Minister, it was passed on and answered by his Immigration Minister, Hubert Opperman.

These particular letters are reproduced here to give the authenticity to my claim to have "kick-started" the alterations to the Australian Immigration Policy and the eventual abolition of "The White Australia Policy".

This policy was introduced to Australian immigration laws about 1897, and made law in 1901, to stop the influx of Asian immigrants (or anyone who could not claim white European heritage) into Australia.

This discrimination really got up my nose, as the existing policy was responsible for the enormous influx of the dregs of England and Europe who, in many, many cases, thought they were superior to us Australian Colonials "who owed those from the old country" a free living, thus becoming a drag on the Australian economy.

There were a number of letters in between these two as can be seen in Opperman's reference to material not included in my "original".

Anyway, following is the story which gives me great satisfaction in that it shows for fact that I did "kick-start" the cause of multi-culturalism in Australia.

Today, I can look out across shopping centres, church choirs, Australian entertainers and in all walks of Australian life and see the mix of nations and know that I helped bring this about. If I achieve nothing else major in my life, I believe I did help "Advance Australia"!

## THE STORY

It was in 1965 that I started a series of back and forth letters with Canberra over their intransigent attitude to allowing Asians to stay in Australia.

Many students, including Asians from Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines came to Australia to study under what was termed (I think) the Colombo Plan, financed by the Australian taxpayer.

However, once they graduated, the Asian students were not allowed to apply for settlement in Australia but had to return to their respective countries.

The problem with this was that there was no work for them at home, so many moved to Canada where they were welcomed with open arms. After spending some time in Canada they could get a work permit to work in the USA.

The stupidity of this Australian policy was that we were educating all these young men for the benefit of other countries.

I found that if the student was Caucasian he stood a good chance of being able to stay in Australia. This was all because of the "White Australia Policy" that had its beginnings in the late 1800's and became law in 1901.

I must admit, it was probably because I had very close Asian friends amongst these students, that it came to my notice. The stupidity of educating all these students for the benefit of Canada and the USA, along with the politicians' belief that they, as Caucasians, were better than the Asians, really got me mad.

The two letters reproduced here were the only ones to survive my many travels and moves, buried in a box of other papers.

As you can see when you read the government's reply to one of letters, that Opperman continued to claim there was no such thing as the "White Australia Policy". (Even though it was well-known and enshrined in government policy.)

Over the years I always liked to think that I had a hand in "stirring the pot" that started the process of abolishing it. The truth of this was vindicated when a search on line brought up the articles by Hubert Opperman (who made the claim that there "was no White Australia Policy") that stated changes were made to the immigration policy allowing immigration of all races who "could show they would be a benefit to Australia".

The wording virtually mirrors that which, 12 months earlier, I had advocated so strongly.

Even then, he refers to it as the "non-European Policy" rather than its correct designation of "White Australia Policy" when introduced. (Typical arrogant politician who did not want to admit his claim was wrong.)

The following Opperman quote is an extract from government records:

"After a review of the non-European policy in March 1966, Immigration Minister Hubert Opperman announced applications for migration would be accepted from well-qualified people on the basis of their suitability as settlers, their ability to integrate readily and their possession of qualifications positively useful to Australia."

Note: He refers to it as "the non-European policy", not what it was: "The White Australia Policy" - as if everyone didn't know.

Shades of my proposal! It took nearly 12 months, but it got there! The White Australia Policy abolition, changed in 1966, was finally officially abolished altogether in 1973.

This change was not broadly publicised by the media. They, like me, could not have envisaged the dramatic effect this simple change would have on Australian society. The beginning of Australia as one of the best multi-cultural societies in the world. Yes, there are elements we could do without, but these would more than likely have eventuated regardless of whether Australia remained "white only" or became the multi-cultural society it is. Radical elements can evolve from any society.

Following are the copies of my first letter (dated 5 July 1965) and Hubert Opperman's last to me (dated what looks like 23 August 1966) - still declaring there was no White Australia Policy.

(Note he refers to another of my letters dated 17 August, proving the exchange of other letters in between those shown.)

ORIG  
DRAFT  
COPY

Stuart L. Oliver  
4 Payten Street  
Ryde, N.S.W.

5th July, 1965

Dear Sir,

It is way past time something was done to review and modify the White Australian Policy. It is time the evidence of its value to the country was weighed against the undemocratic and unchristian meaning that its name implies.

I am a fourth-generation Australian.... An Australian proud of his heritage.... BUT an Australian who hangs his head in shame at the mention of the "White" Australian Policy.

Our countries' leaders, our press, and our people are fast to denounce other countries that have internal trouble through racial discrimination such as America and South Africa. But the fact remains that the word "White" in the White Australian Policy screams of racial discrimination.

This policy could eventually lead Australia to its own destruction. Strong words? Yes! But the facts are there for anyone to see who will just stop and think.

I am not about to advocate for its abolition...but for its modification to that of select immigration.... Immigration of men and women, regardless of colour, who can and will lift Australia to greater heights.

Only a short distance to the north of us a struggle between democracy and communism goes on in a divided country, Vietnam. The outcome of this struggle is more serious than Australians generally believe.

On our northern doorstep we have the makings of another Vietnam... New Guinea! Another divided country! With independence in the not-so-distant future, any steady-thinking man can see that power-hungry Indonesia will not stop at the West Irian border.

One possible preventive of this would be if New Guinea were to accept Stateship of Australia, or some other form of alliance which would include it as part of the Commonwealth of Australia.

A main barrier to this is the "White Australian Policy". This policy makes it impossible for indigenes of New Guinea to settle in Australia. We can go there, but they cannot come here. As long as this state of affairs lasts their can be no complete unity between the two countries.... A unity which is a must for the protection of both New Guinea AND Australia.

While this policy of "white" immigration continues we must draw our settlers from the European countries of the world.

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In this it has proved fruitless to expect the well-educated professional and tradesmen to give up good jobs and homes to start afresh in a new land. Hence the tremendous influx of labourers and sub-standard tradesmen. Of these many become a burden on society when work to suit their capabilities (and expectations!) is not available. Many return home, especially those from England and Italy.

Why? The English moan that things are not what they expected...perhaps, coming from the lower and middle classes of England, they expect to find themselves superior to us so-called colonials, only to find us a very independent people with high standards. Many Italians come, work hard, and earn enough to return home and start themselves in business.

This type of migrant cannot be avoided, nor is it advancing the purpose of immigration. While the authorities work to solve this problem the answer sits squarely before the government's eyes.... That is, to eliminate this blot of racial discrimination from our immigration laws.... To open the way for the advent of brains from all nations.

Attending our universities are students from many countries, especially those to the north of us. Among them are many who would jump at the opportunity to be able to obtain jobs and build their lives in and for Australia. Many of these students leave here to continue their studies in America because there the restricting laws of immigration are flexible enough to make way for the young scientist, engineer, accountant, etc., to seek employment and help to advance that country. Why not here?

We claim Malaysia, the Philippines, etc., to be our friends.... We give them aid in various fields.... But is this sufficient?... Can we claim the right of total friendship while we refuse them the right to intermingle with our society? Of course not! Surely those in authority must be aware of this situation, or are they still living in the colonial days of slavery, suffering from delusions of the "supremacy of the white man's intelligence"? If so, and if they continue this train of thought, they will, in the not too distant future, be in for a rude and violent awakening.

In recent times we have heard many of our church leaders claiming that we should not be interfering in the Vietnam crisis. This is shallow thinking by men who are considered leaders in the community. If they are to raise their voices in the interests of peace let it be a united effort to first set our own house in order by the eradication of one of the greatest anomalies in our law which leads to resentment and creates an impossible situation for the uniting of

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Australia with her northern neighbours. Let them expound God's law of "love thy neighbour", in which "neighbour" includes all mankind, irrespective of colour or creed.

No country or people, regardless of colour, would hold it against us for having a law which gave us the right of SELECT IMMIGRATION, which would be obviously aimed at the improvement of our country, and possibly create in some of them a desire to better themselves that they might have the opportunity of joining in the growth of this potentially great land.

"Advance Australia" the anthem cries.... Let this be a motto of truth and reality, aimed at the future and not left to die in political antipathy.



Stuart L. Oliver

Ryde.

*The following two pages is one of the replies I received to this from Hubert Opperman, Minister for Immigration at that time.*

*Although, in it, he still declares there is no such thing as the "White Australia Policy", seven months after the initial exchange of letters (there were several of them), he announced the change of policy allowing application by "non-European" immigrants who "possess qualifications positively useful to Australia".*

*This was the beginning of the end of the "White Australia Policy" and I feel that I, and my friend Tony Seow, for whom I started this "row", can be satisfied that we did have a part in its abolition.*

*The "debate" papers he referred to at the end of this following letter were typical "poly-speech" - they said nothing about the "White Australia Policy" and "non-Europeans".*



MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION,  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE,  
CANBERRA, A.C.T.

23 AUG 1966

Dear Sir,

I refer to your letter of 17th August regarding immigration policy in relation to Asians.

There is no "White Australia Policy".

Certainly Australia's immigration policy is based, and rightly, upon a need to ensure the swiftest possible integration of the new settlers whom we admit. It is also a fact that the Government continues the aim of a homogeneous, as opposed to a multi-racial, Australian nation.

Neither of these considerations means that Asian people are excluded from Australia. On the contrary, as the Government's decisions earlier this year emphasised, there is proper provision for the entry of non-European people in several categories; and it is envisaged that the numbers entering will be greater than before.

You suggest we can ignore experiences in other countries, and remark "Most racial problems today centre round the Negroes, not Asians". I suggest you consider further the situation in, for example, the countries of South East Asia where very large Chinese communities, though settled for generations, remain quite distinctively Chinese still. These countries have themselves been obliged to impose strict controls of a discriminatory kind. You are aware of course that serious integration problems exist in Britain as a result of the entry of large numbers of people of Asian, as well as African, origin. The entry of Asians to Fiji, and the existence of very different communities in that Colony, might also be noted. These are only some of the examples to be considered.

Australia does not contend that Asians cannot integrate here but only that the integration, of any excessively large numbers admitted, could be protracted over many generations, and during that time there could arise serious social problems and frictions from which we are happily free. As it is, people from Asia and Africa who come to visit Australia are at once impressed by the absence of racial prejudice and "colour bars" such as exist in so many other countries.

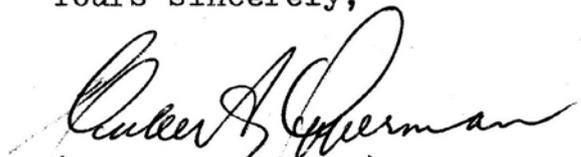
You believe that it is "stupidity" to expect private Asian students here to go back "to their own countries where employment is uncertain and a much lower standard of living assured". In the case of these students, as well as those sponsored by Governments under the Colombo Plan and other schemes, Australia has in mind the development of Asian countries. We afford to their nationals facilities for education and training which are both in strong demand by our own young people and expensive to the Australian taxpayer. (Fees paid by the students do not cover these costs). We gladly do

this to help our neighbours in their development and need for greater numbers of qualified people - a need far more pressing than our own. It would be a negation of this if we encouraged the students to stay in Australia to help fill our own shortages of skilled people.

It is understandable that some of the young people concerned should be tempted to seek permanent residence here and the higher living standards we have. I believe that most can be expected to appreciate what Australia's true motives are - especially if Australians generally realize the Government's aim and explain it.

You may find the attached papers of interest, consisting of the debate in Parliament in March last on the Government's review of policy, and an address by me to a seminar in Canberra on 28th May.

Yours sincerely,

  
(Hubert Opperman)

~~Stuart L. Oliver, Esq.,~~  
4 Payten Street,  
RYDE. N.S.W.

In this letter, Hubert Opperman refers to the changes that were made in March 1966 - roughly 7 months after my first letter that suggested these changes.

There is no doubt in my mind that Opperman did not want these changes made but was pressured by those above him when they realised I was right in that most of these Colombo students, whose studies were being financed by the Australian taxpayer, and who could not stay in Australia because of the White Australia Policy, were going to Canada and the United States due to lack of employment opportunities in their own countries that were still trying to recover from the devastation of war.

His statement that "There is no White Australia Policy", claiming that the changes made in March 1966 vindicated that statement, showed me he did not approve of the changes.

These policy changes were very much down-played by Opperman in the local media or else I would have heard about them from the many students I knew who would have jumped at the chance to stay in Australia.

As you see in his "press statement", he referred to it as the "non-European policy", not "The White Australia Policy". This, I believe, was so he did not draw attention to the White Australia Policy.

It took the Federal Government another 7 years (approx) to accept that, because of the changes made in 1966, the White Australia Policy was obsolete and hence they abolished it altogether. Opperman would not have been happy!

I was!