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PEOPLING THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
PART 1: A WHITE ELEPHANT IN A WHITE AUSTRALIA?
THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, 1901-1920

by
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As a result of negative net immigration during the 1890s depression, Australians at the time of Federation were preoccupied about the slow rate of growth of the population. The non-Aboriginal population at the end of 1901 was approximately three and three-quarter million, and the publication in March 1904 of the Report of the New South Wales Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth Rate and the Mortality of Infants did nothing to allay these concerns. Despite the perceived need for more people, the desire for racial unity was paramount. The main goals of policy makers at the time were to preserve a ‘white’ and essentially British Australia and create an imperial bastion in the Southern Hemisphere.

Consequently, a federal policy on the restriction of non-European immigration came into being and remained in place for at least half a century. It was directly translated into law with the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act and the Pacific Island Labourers’ Act in 1901. The reasons behind this legislation included the desire of British Australians to preserve their heritage and the widespread acceptance in western countries of social Darwinism and the notion of a hierarchy of races, and by extension, a hierarchy of preferred immigrants. Fear of the consequences of ‘racial admixture’, the desire to avoid the friction between ethnic groups common in other countries, and a concern to maintain wage rates and working conditions dearly won by the emerging labour movement, were other contributing factors. Not only were Asians prohibited from entry and Pacific Islanders deported but it was widely believed that the indigenous peoples would eventually disappear or be gradually absorbed through intermarriage with the rest of the population.

In the early years of the twentieth century, debates about immigration focused on which ethnic groups and individuals to prohibit rather than which to encourage. There was almost complete unanimity within official circles on the need for immigration restriction. The few dissenters who did articulate their views mostly came from northern Australia. The Brisbane Chamber of Commerce and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the employer group having the largest interest in the Queensland sugar industry, repeatedly called for a Royal Commission into tropical labour. They believed that the production of sugar was dependent upon Melanesian labour and the new immigration legislation posed a threat to the future of their industry. Consequently, although the Immigration Restriction Act passed with little or no opposition, the Pacific Island Labourers’ Act became law only by a very narrow margin, owing to the persistent objections of Queensland plantation owners.

At the time of Federation, owing to the state of the economy in the aftermath of the 1890s depression, there was almost no public discussion of the future peopling of Australia through immigration. The main debates in both federal Houses of Parliament were over the means by which exclusion could be carried out. Once the controversial dictation test had been decided upon, discussion focussed on aspects of its implementation. For example, there was concern by some members of the Queensland and South Australian Governments that a test in English might exclude Germans, Scandinavians and other non-English speaking Europeans who had made significant contributions to the development of those states. Free Trader Sir William McMillan of New South Wales was concerned that some Irish, Welsh and French Canadians might be similarly excluded. Any references to immigration in Hansard in the early years after Federation reflect contemporary preoccupations such as exemptions from the dictation test, forged entry permits and the number of ‘aliens’ already residing in Australia. Government documents contain numerous references to ‘foreigners’ and ‘aliens’. ‘Aliens’ referred to all those of non-British descent, not only Asians, Africans and Pacific Islanders but also southern Europeans. Those causing the greatest concern were Italians and
subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire living in Queensland and Western Australia, Greeks in New South Wales, Chinese and Japanese in the Northern Territory, and the small number of Russians throughout Australia. The subject of immigration restriction in the period of ‘white Australia’ has been well documented. Far less attention has been given to the active recruitment of immigrants and the contemporary debates surrounding these policies. Potential immigrants to Australia from Federation to World War II fell into three broad categories: firstly, non-Europeans who were prohibited; secondly, the British who were encouraged and often assisted in various ways; and thirdly, non-British Europeans who were permitted to enter but not necessarily welcomed in large numbers. Europeans who were suspected of being under contract, and who arrived in groups and congregated in particular areas which officials called ‘alien blocs’, were particularly discouraged. Much of the writing in the field of immigration encouragement in the period under consideration focuses on official government schemes of land settlement, soldier settlement and group settlement emphasising, for the most part, their failure to achieve anticipated results. Book titles reflect these themes of disappointment; for example, Marilyn Lake’s The Limits of Hope published in 1987 and Michael Roe’s Australia, Britain and Migration, sub-titled, A Study of Desperate Hopes, published in 1995.

Of interest also, particularly in the 1920s, are the numerous immigration schemes put forward by parliamentarians, businessmen and visionaries, which never came to fruition. They were either too costly, too ambitious or, for one reason or another, ill-conceived. The National Archives of Australia possesses literally dozens of files containing proposals submitted to the Commonwealth Government in that period often labelled ‘Australia Unlimited’, which were never implemented. The discourses within these archival records highlight the way ‘the national project’ was envisaged by public men. Most of the schemes aimed to satisfy the twin objectives of peopling the nation with ‘British stock’ and filling spaces deemed to be ‘empty’, schemes which ignored the presence of Aboriginal peoples, however sparsely distributed. Central to the construction of the nation was the notion of European/Western and particularly British, superiority.

A large number of these proposals were directed towards northern Australia to counter, through closer European settlement, the perceived threat from ‘the Asian hordes’, commonly termed ‘the yellow peril’. Within these contemporary discourses, the non-European, the non-Western was depicted as inferior, as the ‘other’, to be feared or derided. Yet, despite the apparent widespread acceptance of the benefits of a British Australia, and the legislation already in place to exclude non-Europeans, there was another public debate throughout this period concerning the ability of ‘white races’ to survive and thrive in the tropics.

Within a very short time after Federation, some major stumbling blocks appeared in the administration of the ‘white Australia’ policy. The first of these related to the very concept of ‘whiteness’. Research continues apace over exactly what this meant and how it was represented and interpreted. Over the next four decades, immigration restrictions were gradually extended to include certain southern and eastern Europeans thought not to be sufficiently ‘white’. These restrictions, from the time of the World War I to the outbreak of World War II, took various forms. Some Europeans were totally prohibited from entry for certain periods, for example enemy aliens from 1920 to 1925. Others, such as Greeks, Albanians, Yugoslavs, Maltese and Italians were subject to numerical limits. Entry conditions not generally applied to Britons,
such as the necessity for Australian guarantors and heavy landing money requirements, were imposed on all Europeans from 1925.11 Population policies in general became increasingly racist and British oriented.

Secondly, many questioned whether the 'white Australia' policy should apply at all to northern Australia. Throughout this period, employers in the Queensland sugar industry, concerned about problems of labour, continued to argue against the Federal immigration policies in relation to the north. At the same time they did not question the applicability of that legislation to the south. They argued that a strict adherence to the 'white Australia' policy need not apply to the north and that Asians and Africans could be temporarily settled there. The term 'the north' was used rather loosely, referring to tropical Australia in general. In relation to the Northern Territory, Mr Samson, member for Wimmera, argued in the House of Representatives after the transfer to the Commonwealth in 1911, that it would be necessary 'to introduce a special class of legislation because we cannot expect to settle this portion of Australia on the well-worn lines followed in the southern and eastern states'.12

Thus, in some parts of Australia, there was intense lobbying for the extension of the existing immigration restrictions so that they also covered 'semi-coloured' Europeans, particularly Greeks, Italians and Maltese.13 In other areas, many argued that there had to be some relaxation of the legislation, if the Territory and other parts of northern Australia were to be successfully settled. These two contradictory pressures on the federal government gathered momentum over the following years. Territorians remained ambivalent.

Differing views over the acceptable degree of 'whiteness' is illustrated by a question posed in the Senate by John McDougall, member for Wannon, Victoria, to the Minister of External Affairs in 1910. McDougall quoted the High Commissioner in London as saying that the prospect of Australians settling in the Northern Territory was unpromising and that Italians from Calabria and other people from southern Europe, who were accustomed to heat, would make their homes there. McDougall asked the Minister if he agreed that the Territory was suitable for desirable 'white' people. If so, would he instruct the High Commissioner to refrain from making statements in London to the contrary.14 It is evident that, in his own view, Calabrians were undesirable.

The recurring 'problem' of populating the north thus produced a conflict in Australian preconceptions, the words 'problem' or 'burden' in this context being frequently used. The issue of whether Anglo-Saxons were suited to life in the tropics was hotly debated.15 In successive reports on the labour aspects of the sugar industry, Dr Walter Maxwell, a British agricultural scientist and Commonwealth adviser on the industry, claimed that the capacity of the European worker in the canefields decreased as he went north.16 In short, for some, a 'white Australia' clashed with the common view that only Asians and Africans could flourish in tropical conditions. Others were convinced that there was a real opportunity in the Northern Territory to set an example in the development of tropical agriculture using 'white' labour.17 It is interesting to note that public debates over 'coloured labour' rarely included Aboriginal labour, at a time when Aboriginal stockmen and domestic servants were the mainstay of the pastoral industry in the north.18

Discussions over the particular relation of the north to the 'white Australia' ideal also took place in the context of the administration of the Northern Territory. This question was brought up at the time of Federation by the South Australian Parliament, which had governed the Territory since 1863 and could no longer accept the financial burden involved. The South Australian Government had made concerted efforts to develop and settle the area but with little long-term
success. The Overland Telegraph Line was completed in 1873, Port Darwin (Palmerston) was surveyed and settled as the capital city, and the Darwin to Pine Creek railway, the first section of a proposed north-south transcontinental railway begun in 1886, had been built. Agriculture had been tried, though with limited results, and pastoral activities encouraged. Mining had boomed temporarily, especially around Pine Creek. Despite these efforts, or perhaps because of them, the Territory’s debt to South Australia had grown to over two million pounds by 1901. Sir John Langdon Bonython, editor of the *Adelaide Advertiser*, Liberal Protectionist and a man of considerable influence well beyond his own state, urged in the House of Representatives in June 1901 that the Commonwealth take it over. The alternative, he said, was resumption by the Crown and direct administration by the British Colonial Office. (There were other solutions periodically put forward, including the handing over of the Territory to private trading companies.) Bonython argued that the Commonwealth would be able to extend the Pine Creek railway to the South Australian railway system allowing further links with other states. He urged that for reasons of national development and defence, the matter should be addressed without delay.

In the same year, another South Australian member of parliament, Free Trader Patrick McMahon Glynn, contended that the ‘heroic sacrifice’ of South Australia in keeping the Northern Territory ‘nearly white’, at great expense to itself, should be considered by the government. This statement is barely credible, since at the turn of the century, the ‘white’ population of the Territory could only be regarded as a significant minority if the non-European population, including the Aboriginal population, is taken into account. The Chinese population alone outnumbered Europeans by more than three to one in 1901 as the following table shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population of the Northern Territory, March 1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the Aboriginal population at the turn of the century was estimated at well over 10,000, but numbers were difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the perception that South Australia had kept the Territory ‘nearly white’ at great expense to itself was a persistent one. A decade later in 1911 (the first year there was thought to be a majority of Europeans), William Archibald, Labor member for Hindmarsh, argued in the House of Representatives that ‘in undertaking the government of the Territory, South Australia had bitten off more than it could chew but she kept the Territory a white man’s country’ [my emphasis]. ‘Year in and year out’, he claimed, ‘she bore the full burden of that policy, long before it became the established policy of Australia’.

Many of these contemporary notions about the development of the north and its potential for settlement had their genesis in the south. Within colonial and post-colonial discourses, the imperial core was London, while the periphery consisted of the colonies and later dominions. These imperial peripheries, however, had their own centres and outposts. The colonial centre was urban Australia, the growing cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, which dominated constructions of race and nation and indeed the official archival record of the ‘national project’.
The Northern Territory was the outpost of outposts, where the extreme seasonal variations were little known except by those who lived there throughout the whole year. David Walker suggests that urban Australia around the turn of the century was largely unaware of conditions in the outback, and particularly the extent of the thriving Asian population in the north.\textsuperscript{26}

It was originally thought that control of the Territory would be a profitable venture for South Australia but instead it had become the state’s ‘white elephant’. That the maintenance of the Territory was burdensome and costly cannot be doubted. The disparaging metaphor of a ‘white elephant’ was used as early as the 1870s in the \textit{Northern Territory News}, and later in parliamentary debates and by various authors over the years. W J Sowden in a publication of 1882 described the Territory as ‘that extreme northern country of ours, which we have called by courtesy the Northern Territory, but too often, with bitterness, our white elephant’ [my emphasis].\textsuperscript{27} South Australian Premiers F W Holder and J G Jenkins both agreed to hand over the Territory to the Federal Government if the latter would take responsibility for the debts South Australia had incurred. Holder was a Free Trader who had held positions as Minister of the Northern Territory and commissioner on the best means of promoting settlement there; Jenkins was a Protectionist and, from 1905-1908, South Australian Agent-General in London.\textsuperscript{28} Both therefore, were speaking from relatively well informed positions.

It was not until January 1911, after repeated delays caused by indecision, political wrangling and Commonwealth economic constraints, that the federal government finally took control of the administration of the Northern Territory. While it was widely believed that, under federal jurisdiction, the Territory would achieve the progress that had remained elusive in former years, its settlement continued to be a controversial issue throughout the following decades. This was especially so in relation to the assumptions underlying Australia’s immigration and population policies, that immigrants would be ‘white’ and preferably British.

The Northern Territory comprises an immense area that has always been sparsely peopled. Alan Powell speaks of it as a land left over when Britons and British Australians had taken what they wanted of Australia.\textsuperscript{29} In 1900, much land was under lease but only a small portion was stocked. Efforts to promote settlement through large pastoral leases had been generally unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{30} Charles Dashwood, Government Resident at the turn of the century, claimed that many who applied for leases had no intention of complying with the regulations but acquired and held land simply for speculative purposes. He advocated the advantages in developing tin, copper, gold and other mining concerns owing to cheap labour and the abundance of fuel and water.\textsuperscript{31} Given the extreme union opposition to any form of ‘cheap labour’ after 1901 (one of the reasons, though perhaps not the primary one, for restricting the entry of non-Europeans), it is difficult to see how success on this premise could have been achieved. Agricultural ventures were also repeatedly put forward.

Some of the problems of peopling the north had already been highlighted in a Northern Territory Royal Commission of 1895, held to inquire into ‘all matters relating to the Northern Territory, further development of its resources and its better government’. These included unsuitable land, land speculation, shortage of labour and capital, mismanagement and maladministration. Other problems intrinsic to the Territory were not acknowledged, notably isolation, distance, cost of development, and especially the climate, with its heat, floods, droughts, pests and
diseases. The need for 'expert' scientific advice on settlement possibilities and the completion of the north-south railway, as in other contemporary documents, were underlined.

As the table given earlier shows, the population of the Territory, exclusive of Aborigines, was just over 4,000 in 1901 and still predominantly non-European. Over the following decade, this figure steadily declined causing grave concern. While the European population slowly but perceptibly gained ground from 1899 onwards, the Asian population diminished and with greater rapidity, leading to an overall loss of between 150 and 200 people per year.33 Ironically, the effect on the remaining Chinese was positive in that they were able to demand higher wages for their services, especially in mining. In 1906, the lowest population for over a quarter of a century was recorded. Two years later; in 1908, the loss was still over 6% for the twelve-month period. From 1905 to 1910, the subject of population decline occupied the foremost position in the annual Residents' Reports. Every aspect of the Territory (industry, production, revenue, past history and future possibilities) was placed in the context of the very small population and the mixed nationalities of which it was composed. The causes for this decline in population during the first decade of the century can be attributed to a number of factors: uncertainty of land tenure; low prices for base metals leading to a decline in mining activity; demand in neighbouring states for agricultural labour at rates which tempted many Chinese away from the Territory; and uncertainty about the future of the Territory under the transfer proposals.

While Europeans were in the minority in the overall population until 1911, women made up a minority of the European population. This gender imbalance caused major social problems, exacerbated by high alcohol consumption in the north which frequently led to relationships between European men and Aboriginal women. The increased number of children from mixed backgrounds and the high prevalence of venereal disease within Territory communities, both indigenous and non-indigenous, drew censure but little sympathy from government officials.34

Comparatively little has been written about white women in northern and central Australia35 but one argument has been that women did not enjoy living in the Territory. There were virtually no European domestic servants, and in any case, many housewives could not afford the luxury of a household help, except that of an Aboriginal person. Life was arduous at best, particularly in the wet season. Although women had varied experiences, all faced isolation and loneliness, poor transport and communications, inadequate medical facilities, lack of education for their children and general hardship.35 Later debates about whether 'whites' could thrive in the tropics often focussed more closely on women than men.

Past immigration legislation, both colonial under the South Australian Government after 1863, and national since 1901, had been specifically intended to prevent the Territory being peopled by other than Europeans. The Chinese Immigration Restriction Act of 1888 and the later Commonwealth legislation of 1901 had been successful in preventing Asian immigration and increasing Asian emigration. At the same time, these policies had given no corresponding impetus to European settlement. Indeed, as far as state legislation was concerned, the opposite had occurred. As Australia moved gradually out of the effects of the 1890s depression, state governments in turn, with some prodding from Alfred Deakin in his successive terms as Prime Minister, began to make land available for immigrants and reintroduce assistance schemes where they had been in suspension. Similarly, the Territory Government Resident from 1905 to 1910, Charles Edward Herbert, proposed several ways in which people could be attracted to the north. These included: completing the transcontinental railway; continuing to prospect for
gold at depth on existing goldfields, and for coal by means of diamond drills; establishing closer pastoral settlement; offering financial assistance and free land grants of 160 acres to married settlers with families; and providing free and assisted passages to European immigrants.

Legislation along these lines was passed in 1907. Herbert argued for these measures on the grounds of defence, not only of the Territory but the whole of Australia. He quoted President Theodore Roosevelt: ‘Beware of keeping your north empty; and remember that an unmanned nation invites disaster.' As a result of declining birth rates amongst Europeans throughout the world, Roosevelt warned of ‘race suicide’ and the consequences to world peace of the failure to colonise sparsely peopled lands.

In these years, not only the Northern Territory, but Australia as a whole, seemed unable to secure sufficient numbers of the ‘right type of immigrant’, young ‘white’, healthy British settlers with capital who were prepared to go on the land. On the other hand, there were various requests and proposals to send ‘foreign’, that is, non-British, immigrants whom state governments did not regard as particularly desirable. For example, James Barrett, influential Melbourne social reformer, and Richard Arthur, New South Wales Parliamentarian, both wanted to broaden the sources of immigrants by encouraging Maltese and Anglo-Indians to Australia. Senator Barwell, Premier of South Australia, argued over many years that the Northern Territory should be settled with non-European immigrants. Certainly in the second half of the nineteenth century this was a common expectation. Yet moves in 1908 in Malta to arrange for the emigration of skilled Maltese artisans, labourers and sailors, who were not only European but British, to other British colonies were not well received by the Australian states. This general unwillingness on the part of Australian policy makers to assist in the emigration of the Maltese led to considerable ill-feeling between Australia and Malta, and between Australia and Great Britain when such immigrants were members of the British Empire. The argument was that they were not sufficiently ‘white’.

After the transfer to the Commonwealth took effect, there were more positive measures to increase the European settlement of the Territory. This primarily meant agriculture despite previous failures, and some cereal cultivation was attempted. Nicholas Holtze, Government Botanist and Curator of the Botanic Gardens in Darwin, experimented with some success growing sisal hemp and upland rice, but government sanction for extensive trials was not forthcoming. Wheat from India was introduced and there was also a revival of interest in the mining industry. In May 1911, the Commonwealth appointed Walter Campbell, formerly secretary for the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, to inspect the lands of the Territory north of the 15th parallel with a view to stimulating agricultural development. On his advice, four experimental demonstration farms were established at Rum Jungle (Batchelor) on the Daly River and Mataranka in 1912 although major problems of labour and markets were faced. Farm blocks of 150 to 300 hectares were offered free to prospective settlers. In the years just prior to World War I, the Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, and the Minister of External Affairs, Patrick McMahon Glyn, actively promoted immigration under suitable conditions to the Territory. The problems of recruiting immigrants in the southern states in 1913 and 1914, a period of drought, combined with a sense of vulnerability owing to growing political instability in Europe, may have turned their attention to the closer settlement of the north.

Nevertheless, the progress of land settlement in the Territory was disappointingly slow. While all states experienced difficulties in securing what they regarded at the time as ‘the best class of immigrant’, the Anglo-Saxon and northern European, the Northern Territory faced additional problems of retaining any settlers who arrived. Despite the liberal government concessions,
once immigrants had saved enough, they inevitably moved to Queensland or the southern states. While the idea that Europeans could develop the north persisted, locals conceded that the early stages of development at least, were only likely to be accomplished by immigrants accustomed to working for prolonged periods in similar climatic conditions.46

A Royal Commission to investigate railways, ports and the possibilities for a new capital was appointed in March 1913 and reported in February 1914. The commissioners, F Clarke, D Lindsay and A Combes, concentrated on the future of the pastoral and mining industries, emphasising that railway extension was crucial for development. The first administrator of the Territory, John Gilruth, was an enthusiast for economic development.47 He believed that the only possibility was to concentrate on southern Europeans as the nucleus of permanent settlement. The construction of the overland railway southward from Pine Creek would, he hoped, provide labour for the adult men while their families could be settled in groups on areas of land set aside for the purpose and sufficiently close to the railway for frequent visits by their husbands and fathers. Bringing families to Australia also served another agenda. Gilruth argued that:

the possible effect on our non-moral native population of a large number of single men engaged in railway construction cannot be contemplated with equanimity, while the results to the men themselves, in a country where venereal diseases are too common, may be deplorable.48

Apart from the extension of the railway from Pine Creek to Katherine between 1914 and 1917, no action was taken on the report. Even the building of the railway was not solely due to any specific recommendation of the commissioners. Rather, it was a condition agreed to by the Commonwealth Government in June 1914 in connection with a contract with the Vestey Brothers for the erection of meat freezing and processing works in Darwin. Upon these developments great hopes were pinned. At the time, there was a desperate need for labour, a problem made more acute by the outbreak of World War I, the loss of able-bodied young men and the increased demand for foodstuffs.49 Although the war increased the fervour for British-Australian workers, the Territory in 1914 was home to a variety of ethnic groups. A number of Japanese, Taiwanese, Malay, Indonesian and Filipinos worked in the pearling and trepang industries in northern ports. In addition, 385 Maltese were employed, along with many Greeks and Chinese, as manual labourers on the Pine Creek to Emungalan railway extension. Vesteyes, unable to obtain sufficient workers locally or from Great Britain, began recruiting immigrant labour from elsewhere. Fifty labourers from Malta were assisted to the Territory in 1914.50 Barry York notes, however, that the hot flat desert conditions were not conducive to permanent settlement and by 1921, only two Maltese-born men remained in the Territory.51 Several other immigrant workers left in the early 1920s but this had more to do with the closure of the Vesteyes meatworks and the slump in the pastoral industry than the climatic conditions. Vesteyes had been Darwin’s major employer of labour and, despite its battles with the union movement the operations associated with it had contributed significantly to the doubling of the European population in the Territory over the previous decade.52

World War I brought security concerns to the fore. It also changed attitudes to certain recent immigrants already in Australia, such as former subjects of countries against which the Allies were fighting - Germans, Austro-Hungarians and Turks. While the war necessarily brought about an end to any planned immigration to Australia, a small number of immigrants did arrive between 1914 and 1918. Many of these had already booked passages to Australia or were actually ‘on the water’ when war broke out.
There was particular opposition to any immigration during the war as it was felt that immigrants would take the jobs of Australian soldiers fighting overseas. In particular, the arrival in Darwin in July 1915 of the Japanese steamer, ss *Kwanto Maru*, carrying 220 Patagonian immigrants recruited by Vesteys from the Chubut Valley in Argentina, caused a minor outcry from the union movement. There was also concern over the mixed racial origins of the group in the light of earlier widespread publicity, which had emphasised their Welsh background. As it happened, only 28 of the 220 were Welsh. The group also comprised 113 Spaniards, 45 Russians, 30 Italians, one Argentinian, one Frenchman, one Serbian and a Greek. This is an interesting case study, the detailed background to which is provided elsewhere. Above all, it demonstrates the considerable efforts made by both government and industry to attract European settlers to the Territory.

Adverse public reaction similar to that over the Patagonian arrivals occurred when ninety-seven Maltese arrived in Sydney on the *Arabia* in September 1916 and another 214 on the *SS Gange* the following month on the eve of the first conscription referendum. Union opposition followed once more as a result of the suspicion of contract labour and the on-going perception that the Maltese were ‘semi-coloured’, despite the fact that they were British subjects. The dictation test was administered in Dutch and the Maltese deported temporarily to New Caledonia. While this incident is not directly related to Northern Territory settlement, it had far-reaching implications for immigration policy in general with the adoption for the first time of restrictions and numerical limitations for non-British European immigrants to Australia over the following two decades. It particularly influenced a policy adopted in 1918 in relation to Greek immigrants, especially those from Kastelorizo, which did have particular relevance for the Territory. Indeed, Commonwealth legislation in relation to all European immigration in the 1920s probably impacted more on the Territory than most other Australian states.

Because of the significance of Greek, particularly Kastelorizon, immigration for the Territory, it is worth providing some background here. Kastelorizo is a small island sixty miles east of Rhodes in the Mediterranean Sea, part of the Dodecanese group of islands and located close to the Turkish mainland. Inhabited by both Greeks and Turks, and formerly under Turkish rule, the island was occupied by Greece after the 1912-13 war with Turkey. The Great Powers decided, however, that it should be restored to Turkey in accordance with the Treaty of London of 30 May 1913. During World War I, the French Government took possession of the island and the Allies used it as a naval base. It was heavily bombed by the Turks and Germans and many of the inhabitants abandoned their homes to live in trenches. Many Kastelorizians had already emigrated to France, Egypt, Greece and Australia before the war in order to escape Turkish rule and also because of population pressure on the island with the growth of the sponge-diving industry. Those who came to Australia established themselves in communities in Darwin, Perth, Innisfail and Port Pirie. Emigration from Kastelorizo increased during the war years. Between 1908 and 1917 the Kastelorizian population fell from approximately 10,000 to 2,000.

Some 350 non-British immigrants entered the Northern Territory during the war. Many of these were from Kastelorizo; others came from the Greek mainland, Crete, Cyprus, Kalymnos, Symi, Kasos and other islands. Some also travelled by steamer from already established communities in Western Australia: Perth, Fremantle, Collie, Kalgoorlie and elsewhere. During the initial period of Greek settlement in the Northern Territory, 1914 to 1916, the population was largely male; it was not until the men became established that their families joined them. Most worked as employees in a variety of labouring and construction jobs, many for Vesteys, and lived close to their compatriots.
There was some confusion in Australia as to whether these immigrants were Greeks or Turks. Attitudes to Turks at this time were complex and related not only to lingering hostility as a result of the Gallipoli campaign but to racial uncertainties in relation to the 'white Australia' policy. This was indicated during a parliamentary debate in September 1919. In reply to a statement by Queensland Labor Senator Myles Ferricks that they were Turks, P M Glynn, Minister of External Affairs, replied that they were not Turks but 'good Greeks'. In contrast, others believed they should be classed as 'Asiatics'. The question had arisen in connection with a claim for the £5 maternity bonus in 1918 by a woman from Kastellorizo then living in Darwin. The maternity bonus was refused on the ground that she was an 'Asiatic'. Senator Ferricks argued that if she were Greek, the bonus ought not to have been withheld, but if she and other Kastellorizens were 'Asiatics', they should not have been admitted to Australia in the first place.

This again fed into contemporary debates about who could be classed as 'white'. The use of terms such as 'Asiatics', 'coloureds', 'foreigners', 'aliens', 'white aliens', and 'whites' are indicative of racial attitudes in these years and the public confusion over the application of the 'white Australia' policy. There was also some question about the loyalty of Greeks in relation to the war, doubts which intensified anti-Greek sentiments and led to riots in centres of Greek population, such as Kalgoorlie, Boulder and Perth, and to a lesser extent, Darwin, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne in 1916.

In 1918, a number of Greeks in Kastellorizo were waiting to immigrate to Australia. Partly because of the confusion relating to their origins and fearing that large numbers might arrive, the Commonwealth Government in that year prohibited the immigration of all Greeks, except for the close dependants of those already in Australia. Ambassadors and consular officers were instructed confidentially not to grant passports and visas for Greeks who wished to come to Australia. This obviously affected potential immigration to the Territory, slowing down but not stemming the tide owing to the numbers of unaccompanied men already in Darwin. Greeks were not regarded as competitors in the labour market, since eventually they were more likely to own their own businesses, but they were considered with the same degree of doubt in relation to the 'white Australia' policy as the Maltese. Indeed, they were regarded as the least desirable of European settlers from a racial point of view. This was borne out later in 1925 in the Report of the Royal Commission on the Social and Economic Effect of the Increase of Aliens in North Queensland, known as the Ferry Report.

The prohibitions on Maltese and Greeks remained operative until July 1920. As a result of strong pressure from the New South Wales Governor, Sir Gerald Strickland, who had been born in Malta, they were then lifted. Quotas of 260 per annum were imposed, however, the first in relation to Europeans in the period under review. In retrospect, in light of the closure of the Vestey's meatworks in that year and the ensuing economic problems, this may have been a blessing for those who had intended to go to the Northern Territory. It was not until after World War II that another large wave of Greek migration to Darwin occurred, this time, largely from Kalymnos.

The highest population of the Territory on record, 4883 exclusive of Aborigines, was recorded in 1917. This year also boasted the highest European population on record. The totals both increased the following year before once again declining. The European population had more than trebled since the Commonwealth had assumed responsibility, to reach 3767 by June 1918, compared with 1777 Asians. While the total population was still small (estimated in 1918 as 5062, exclusive of mixed races and Aborigines), the changing balance between Europeans and non-Europeans was significant. Another major factor in any discussion of the Northern Territory was the migratory nature of its population as shown by the following figures.
Population Movements in the Northern Territory 1915-1917

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ending</th>
<th>Total No. of Europeans</th>
<th>Arrivals</th>
<th>Departures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31 Dec. 1915</td>
<td>3327</td>
<td>1747</td>
<td>1096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Dec. 1916</td>
<td>3292</td>
<td>1162</td>
<td>1181</td>
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<td>31 Dec. 1917</td>
<td>3425</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>1244</td>
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That a third of the people should come and go annually was not conducive to the best interests of the community.73

Several historians have documented the fortunes of particular agricultural, pastoral and development schemes designed to populate the Territory during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Many as we have seen, were inappropriate and little was achieved, apart from the extension of the North Australian Railway and the establishment of a short-lived meatworks in Darwin. The government experimental farms established before the war were unsuccessful. The government adviser, W S Campbell, was not an expert in tropical agriculture and had not foreseen the problems that were subsequently faced. These included rainfall, which fell in three months of the year, transport difficulties and pests such as white ants. By 1920, the farms at the Daly and Batchelor had been converted into Aboriginal compounds and most of the settlers had left the Territory.74

The closure of the Vestey's meatworks in 1920 had a detrimental influence on the population of the Territory. It resulted in the loss of employment of approximately two-thirds of the men in Darwin. With so many walking the streets, the government was forced to choose between granting free rations or free steerage fares elsewhere, the latter being the preferred option for both the government and the men. The 216 men who took up the offer were predominantly Greeks, Spaniards or Patagonians induced to the Territory in recent years.75 Most of the Patagonians went to north Queensland where some of their descendants remain today. Many Greeks did the same, establishing themselves in towns such as Cairns, Townsville and Innisfail or drifted to the southern capitals. A significant number returned to Western Australia. Others, such as thirteen Russians, paid their own fares home while some elderly Chinese returned to Hong Kong.

The cost to the government of transferring these potential settlers elsewhere was £1 699.17s.6d. Perhaps the government felt some obligation to those induced to come to the Territory under their auspices. In any case, the closure of Vestey's especially affected the Territory's European population, which decreased from 3 767 in 1918-19 to 2 770 in 1919-20.76 By removing 'coloured' people and other 'aliens', any work available could be allocated to the British and Australians and the depletion of what was seen as the more desirable 'white' component of the population could be avoided. The closure of the meatworks brought great forebodings for the future of the Territory, although at the time it was expected that they would reopen as soon as shipping became available. This occurred for one season only in 1925.

The most commonly debated issues about peopling the Territory during the period under review were: the applicability of the 'white Australia' legislation to the north; what exactly was meant by 'white'; and the ability of Europeans, especially women and children, to work and thrive in the tropics. Also of concern was the slow rate of growth, or lack of growth, of the population; the racial composition of the population, that is, the balance between European and non-European, British and non-British; and the lack of security in the north and defence against a
possible Asian invasion. There continued to be a perceived need to settle the ‘empty’ spaces, irrespective of productivity, for reasons of defence and national development and for the promotion of closer settlement through the establishment of an agricultural industry. The problems of isolation and cost of developing transport and communications; the gender imbalance and consequent issues of morality; and the perceived need to avoid ethnic and religious enclaves continued to be discussed. Although these concerns remained much the same over time, the relative balance between them was constantly shifting. At particular times one or another would be uppermost influencing the policy of the day.

In conclusion, it is clear that Australian immigration policies in the early twentieth century and contemporary opinions about the ‘ideal immigrant’ were sometimes at odds with ideas about settling the north. Vast financial and human resources were utilised to encourage settlement, assist pastoralists, promote agriculture and develop transport and shipping facilities. The results in most cases were disheartening. It must be recognised, however, that Darwin was often the last port of call for immigrants arriving from overseas by ship; few stayed aboard until the vessel reached Darwin. Furthermore, internal migration from the other states was always as important as, if not more important than immigration from overseas in terms of annual population movements. Nonetheless, attempts to attract large numbers of people to the Territory were, in the main, unsuccessful.

Notes
1 The support of the Northern Territory Government and the Northern Territory History Awards Committee for this research is gratefully acknowledged.
3 See Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, (CPD), Senate, Vol vi, p 7248.
7 Department of the Interior, Immigration, Prime Minister’s Department (I) EAI Correspondence Files, (Folio System), ‘Objection by Queensland Government to proposed test for the admission of immigrants’, National Archives of Australia (NAA): CRS A8, item 01/27/8.
8 CPD, House of Representatives (HR), 6 September 1901, Vol iv, p 4628.

12 *CPD*, HR, 19 December 1911, p 4736.

13 See for example, *SMH*, 1 February 1902.


15 *Argus* (Melbourne), Leader, 27 May, 7 June 1901.

16 Maxwell’s report entitled ‘Some factors relating to the Cane-Sugar Industry of Australia’ was tabled in the HR on 13 August 1901 and published in the *Argus*, 12 August 1901.

17 For example, Sir David Gordon, member for Boothby, HR, 17 November 1911, p 2847.


19 *Let’s Look at the Northern Territory*, p 38, Historical Society NT, MRS 1874/P1, Box 1, Folder v20, Laidlow, W.C.


23 See the editorial comment in the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 20 March 1903.

24 *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, No 15, 1901-1922, p 939. The 1911 Census gives the non-Aboriginal population as 3310, of which 1729 were Anglo-Australians.

25 *CPD*, HR, 14 November 1911, p 2551 and see Dean Jaensch in Nairn & Serle (eds), *ADB*, vol 7, 1891-1939, p 89.


33 Christie, From the Islands, pp 93-96.

34 See however, Barbara James, 1989, *No Man’s Land: Women of the Northern Territory*.


36 W M Curteis, nd, The Early History of Agriculture and Settlement in the Northern Territory (Australia), Historical Society, NT, NTAS, MRS, 1874/P1, Box 1, Folder U:15, pp 38-39.


40 Total population excluding Aborigines in 1911 was 3271, a decrease of 39 from the previous year ‘but on the side of coloured races’. *Report of the Acting Administrator for the Year 1911*, pp 14-15.
Curteis, nd, The Early History of Agriculture and Settlement in the Northern Territory, pp 34-36.

Report of the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory for the Year 1911, pp 4-5.


SMH, 19 November 1913; Prime Minister’s Department, Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series, ‘Immigration, 1912-1915’, NAA, CRS A2, item 1914, 466/2; Argus, 1 August 1913, p 6.

Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory for the year 1913, p 6.


Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory for the year 1913, p 6.

Christie, From the Islands, pp 60-61.

Donovan, 1984, At the Other End of Australia, p 23.


Argus, 5 July 1915; SMH, 12 July 1915; Donovan, 1984, At the Other End of Australia, p 22. See also Peter Forrest, Patagonians make their mark in Top End, Northern Territory News, 16 March 1999, pp 27-28.


CPD, Senate, 17 September 1919, Vol lxxxix, pp 12,353-54.

See Christie, From the Islands, pp 80-85.


Geoffrey Sherington, 1980, Australia’s Immigrants 1788-1978, p 118.


CPD, Senate, 17 September 1919, Vol lxxxix, p 12,353.

Christie, From the Islands, pp 96-98.

Home and Territories Department, General Correspondence File, Annual Single Number Series, ‘Admission to the Commonwealth of Greeks from Castellorizo [sic], 1918-1919’, NAA, CRS A1, item 19/5153.

Christie, From the Islands, p 104.

NAA, CRS A1, item 20/5870. See also Alcorta, 19, Darwin Rebellion, p 28.

Only 135 Maltese and 224 Greek wives and children were admitted during 1919 and 1920.

NAA, CRS A1, item 19/5153 and 'Enquiry from New South Wales Government', NAA, CRS A1, item 20/5870.

Christie, From the Islands, pp 104-5, 123.

The population in 1914 was 4108; in 1915, it was 4630; in 1916, 4610. Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory for the Years 1915-16 and 1916-17, pp 39-41.

Annual Report of the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory for the year ending 30 June 1920, p 34.

Annual Report of the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory for the year ending 30 June 1920., pp 5-6.

Annual Report of the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory for the year ending 30 June 1920., pp 15.


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