

3) Historical Background of Australia

The Aborigines, the first inhabitants of the Australian continent, arrived roughly 50,000 years ago. By 30,000 years ago, they had spread out across the entire continent, speaking hundreds of different languages and with complex social systems showing significant cultural differences from region to region. Archaeological evidence suggests that Malay, Chinese and Arab seafarers all had contact with Australia before 1500AD but it remained unknown to the Western world until the 17th century.

3.1) European Settlement

The first recorded European contact with Australia was in March 1606, when Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon (1571–1638) charted the coast of north-west Queensland. Later that year, the Spanish explorer Luis Vaez de Torres sailed through the strait separating Australia and Papua New Guinea. Over the next two centuries, European explorers and traders continued to chart the coastline of Australia, then known as New Holland. In 1688, William Dampier became the first British explorer to land on the Australian north-west coast. It was not until 1770 that another Englishman, Captain James Cook, aboard the *Endeavour*, extended a scientific voyage to the South Pacific in order to further chart the east coast of Australia and claim it for the British Crown.

Britain decided to use its new outpost as a penal colony—partly because of the outbreak of war in its previous penal colony, America. In 1777 a fleet of 11 ships carrying about 1500 people—half of them convicts set sail for the anchorage of Botany Bay—around which the city of Sydney was subsequently built arriving in January 1788.

About 160,000 men and women were brought to Australia as convicts from 1788 until penal transportation ended in 1868. The convicts were joined by free immigrants beginning in the early 1790s. The wool industry and the gold rushes of the 1850s provided an impetus for increasing numbers of free settlers to come to Australia.

Scarcity of labor, the size of the land and new wealth based on farming, mining and trade made Australia a land of opportunity for the immigrant although Aborigines suffered enormously, with traditional lifestyles and practices being disrupted and destroyed by loss of land and settler policies verging on genocide.

Australia's soil and climate was better suited for large-scale livestock grazing than for farming. During the 1830s and 1840s the continent was rapidly transformed as

squatters—settlers on unallocated land—established huge sheep “stations” with wool becoming a major export. Availability of land attracted new immigration—from 1830 to 1850 the population of the colonies increased from 70,000 to 334,000. But what really spurred Australia’s growth was the discovery of gold in New South Wales in 1851, followed by finds in Victoria.

In the 10 years following the discovery of gold the Australian population trebled from 400,000 to 1.2 million. British and Irish immigrants led the rush, although significant numbers of Americans, Germans, Italians and Canadians also arrived. The gold rush also gave rise to one of the defining moments in Australian national mythology, an uprising at the Eureka claim at Ballarat in December 1854 over the high cost of mining licenses. (Eureka Rebellion details go here).

The gold strike also attracted immigrants from China, who were met with fierce racial hatred. In 1856 Victoria restricted the entry of Chinese and by the end of the century, exclusionary legislation existed in all the colonies, which laid the basis of the so-called White Australia Policy, which was made explicit by the new federal government in 1901.

Even Queensland, which began to bring in Polynesian laborers for its sugarcane plantations in the 1860s, eventually conformed, and small-scale sugar farms run by whites replaced plantations. For many decades thereafter, the White Australia Policy continued to limit the number of non-European immigrants to Australia.

Politically the Australian colonies slowly obtained self-government. In 1842 New South Wales was granted an enlarged legislative council, with two-thirds of its members to be elected. In 1852 New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Van Diemen’s Land (which changed its name to Tasmania in 1856) were allowed to draw up new constitutions, and these were all approved by the British Parliament by 1856. Similar constitutions were approved for Queensland when it became a colony in 1859 and for Western Australia in 1890. The constitutions provided for bicameral parliaments, with most of the MPs elected on a franchise based on property ownership. Property qualifications were lower for elections to the lower houses, or assemblies, than to the upper houses, or councils. Executive power was held in each colony by a premier and a cabinet or council of ministers, who were required to maintain the support of the lower house. Elections involved a secret ballot—at that time an innovation—which led to the colonial government being quite democratic.

Between 1851 and 1891 the Australian population grew from 437,000 to 3.2 million. It became one of the fastest growing and most urbanized regions of the world. In 1891 more than one-third of Australians lived in the six capital cities. The largest cities, Melbourne and Sydney, were as populous as all but the largest European and American cities. The colonial cities sprawled; Melbourne's 473,000 people occupied as much area as London's 4.7 million.

People gathered in the cities because the principal industry, grazing, involved few people, while mining tended to be carried on in harsh locations and involved diminishing resources which militated against the establishment of permanent settlements. The high level of urbanization was also a reflection of the high demand for goods and services in a prosperous society. Australian per capita incomes exceeded those of the United States and other developed countries. Australia was arguably the first suburban nation and its working people enjoyed a higher standard of living than would have been available to them in their "home" countries.

The capital of each state served as the major port and administrative center for its respective colony. Perceiving others as rivals, each tended to emphasize its own identity, with politicians and the media talking up their differences. Until the 1890s, contacts between individual colonies were secondary to their ties with Britain. Even when transport and communications links were established between the colonies, these did as much to divide as to unite them. It is worth noting that each of the eastern colonies — Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland—built its railways to a different gauge.

The culture of the cities was essentially British. Many colonial Australians read, with a three-month delay due to distance, the books and newspapers being read and discussed in London. Nevertheless, a small number of Australian writers began to be noticed, writing about Australian themes. Interestingly, although the cities dominated Australian life, many of the symbols with which the Australians started fashioning a national identity were those of the countryside or "the bush" or the more remote arid semi desert of the "Outback," in which the small farmer, the miner, the itinerant sheep shearer or the bushranger or outlaw became iconic figures. In the 1890s a Sydney based literary movement based around the weekly journal the *Bulletin*, involving the short-story writer Henry Lawson and balladist A. B. "Banjo" Paterson began to celebrate the Australian countryside as the original source of Australian ideals, which involved a rebelliousness against authority, especially that which saw itself as class-based, and an intense loyalty to

comrades or “mates” in a struggle for life in which the greatest enemy was the merciless nature of the Australian climate.

In 1901 Australia’s six states, previously been self-governing, joined under a federal constitution to form a single nation-state, the Commonwealth of Australia. At the time the settler population was about 4 million, the aborigines numbering around 90,000. Half of the population lived in cities, three-quarters were born in Australia, and the majority were of British descent.

Federation brought with it changes, in that, for the first time, the territory was governed by a body that had territory-wide jurisdiction. Not surprisingly it gave thought as to how to discharge its new responsibilities, in effect, how the new nations should be built. One of the first acts of the new Commonwealth Parliament was to pass the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, which limited migration to people of primarily European origin, a policy which was retained until 1973. Central to the history of Australia in the 20th century was the development of both a national government and a national culture. Australia’s participation in World War I, especially a disastrous action at Gallipoli in 1915, through the writings of war correspondent and historian C. E. W. Bean created a symbol around which a national identity could be forged. Nevertheless, throughout the interwar years, Australia was heavily guided by its cultural and political ties with Britain, generally following British policy in dealing with both the problems of the depression the rise of fascism. Emphasis was therefore placed on following Britain’s leadership in solving the problems of the depression. Australia gave preference to trade with Britain although from the 1920s Japan and the United States were its best customers for its principle export, wool. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the prime minister, Robert Menzies, immediately placed Australia’s small armed forces at Britain’s disposal, despite the fact that the war, until 1941, was in Europe only.

Subsequently Australian forces fought against Japan as well as Germany, but the domination of the United States in the war against Japan showed Australian strategists that the country relied more on the United States than it did on Britain.

While the war resulted in Australia’s rapid industrialization, the post war period was most notable for the mass immigration which drew New Australians, as they were called, from continental Europe as well as from traditional sources in the British Isles. Between 1947 and 1970 more than 2 million immigrants arrived in Australia, more than 60 percent from countries outside the British Isles. In the inner suburbs of the cities

Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs, and Lebanese were creating their own distinctive ethnic enclaves. From the beginning, Australia stressed the goal of assimilation: New Australians were encouraged to quickly learn the English language and assume the Australian way of life. While this population growth did much to change the face of Australia, much of it happened during the 17-year premiership of Robert Menzies (1949-66) who was a staunch anglophile, stressing the links, increasingly more sentimental than political or economic, with Britain. Nevertheless, by the late 1960s, however, representatives of ethnic associations were winning increased support for more pluralistic policies based on multiculturalism. Menzies said that Australia, was “British to our bootstraps” but since the 1970s many Australians have disagreed, and a vociferous republican movement has gained increasing strength.

The post-war relationship between the U.K. and Australia is complex and worthy of some explanation. Since 1901 Australia has been self-governing. The UK government retained only vestigial power to intervene in Australian affairs (until 1986 the UK parliament retained the power to legislate for Australia’s individual states even if this was in fact almost never used, while also until the same year Australian legal cases could be appealed to the UK’s Privy Council). In practice Australia had almost complete autonomy nevertheless Australian policy was heavily influenced by that of the UK—fiscal policy in the 1930s, and the declaration of war in 1939 being perhaps the most visible examples.

3.2) Growth of Republicanism and the Whitlam Government

The main political link between Australia and the UK is that of the English monarch who is head of state of both countries. Since the monarchy is constitutional, this figurehead wields little real power. Nevertheless, many Australians feel that the retention of the English monarch as head of the Australian state puts Australia in a subaltern position incompatible with its modern status.

One of the few rights an English monarch retains is to form and dissolve parliaments. This is almost invariably done on the request of the prime minister of the day or according to constitutionally acknowledged formulas—for example the monarch requests the leader of the party that wins the largest number of seats in an election to form a government. In the U.K. these mechanisms have not proved controversial for many

years, but in Australia events surround the dissolution of the government of Gough Whitlam in 1975 gave significant impetus to the debate on Australian identity and the republican movement. One of the conventions of Britain's unwritten constitution is that a government must resign if it is defeated on a national budget. Whitlam's government was defeated in this way but Whitlam refused to tender his resignation. The governor-general, who as the queen's representative in Australia performs the duties that in Britain the monarch performs directly, then dissolved parliament and called an election. While the reason for this was that Whitlam had refused to act constitutionally, the move was widely interpreted by a population not well-versed in the niceties of Westminster-style constitutional government as the agent of the "queen of England" interfering with a democratically elected Australian government. Many began to find it anomalous that the Australian nation did not and could not have an Australian head of state, nor that an Australian could not aspire to occupy "the highest post in the land."³³

3.3) The Australian Republican Movement

Australia was believed by the British to harbor republican sympathies long before anything of the like made itself apparent. A large proportion of the convicts transported in the early years were Irish Catholics, and Catholic Ireland, with its frequent rebellions against British rule, was considered no loyal subject of the British crown. The Eureka stockade miners were branded as "disloyal to the queen" although those who were present deny this. Whilst the accusations of disloyalty might have suited British colonial policy, justified or not; ironically, republican groups have subsequently claimed the Eureka miners as their own, however tenuous the actual evidence.

In 1887 a scheme was proposed to tax British colonies for the upkeep of the British navy, the power of which was essential for the maintenance of a global peace conducive to the open trade on which the colonies thrived. Australian delegates to the Imperial Conference where this policy was advanced, opposed it on the basis, rather like the American revolutionaries 111 years earlier, that it was unfair to tax polities that had no political representation— a key issue incidentally in England's civil wars in the 17th century and ideologically incendiary in an "Anglo-Saxon" political context to this day. As

³³ See "The Australian Republican Movement Policy" at <http://www.republic.org.au/page/australian-republican-movement-policy>

a result of the conference proposal, the Australian Republican Association was founded, advocating an independent Australian republic outside the British Empire. The republican movement was also associated with a “white Australia” policy, then opposed by the British government, and secession was seen as a way to overcome veto of the policy by Westminster. A republican constitution was drawn up in 1891, but federation and statehood in 1901 sapped any support for it.

Republicanism lay largely dormant for the next 70 years, only making a significant reappearance in Australian public affairs with Whitlam government’s election in 1972. Whitlam did little to actually move towards a republic, although the pugnacious nature of his Labor Party certainly fired debate. But it was the nature of his dismissal which, as explained above, really fueled a new republican cause.

The arguments for republicanism, as they have evolved since the 1970s, have revolved around the following issues:

- Representation: A person resident in one country cannot, republicans claim, adequately represent another, either to itself or the rest of the world;
- Becoming the Australian head of state should be within the ambition of an Australian.
- Multiculturalism: Australia is no longer a nation of primarily British origin, while settlers from Ireland (a British colony until 1921) and latterly—following the demise of the White Australia policy, other former British colonies, as well as the Australian aborigines, see the Australian crown as a symbol of British imperialism.
- Social values: Modern Australia presents itself as a land of egalitarianism and secularism. Monarchy, with its hereditary nature, is believed to conflict with the first principle, and the peculiar nature of the British monarchy, with its constitutional prohibition on marrying Catholics, conflicts with the second.
- The cultural cringe: This is dealt with in more detail below.

One of the clearest expressions of the rationale for republicanism was made by the prime minister Paul Keating:

For us the world is going - and we are going - in a way, which makes our having the British monarch as our Head of State increasingly anomalous...if the plans for our nationhood were being drawn up now, by this generation of Australians and not those of a century ago, it is beyond question that we would make our Head of State an Australian. But the

creation of an Australian republic is not an act of rejection [of the British heritage]. It is one of recognition: in making the change we will recognize that our deepest respect is for our Australian heritage, our deepest affection is for Australia, and our deepest responsibility is to Australia's future... Our Head of State should embody and represent Australia's values and traditions, Australia's experience and aspirations.... An Australian Head of State can embody our modern aspirations - our cultural diversity, our evolving partnerships with Asia and the Pacific, our quest for reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians, our ambition to create a society in which women have equal opportunity, equal representation and equal rights... The right Head of State for Australia is one of us, embodying the things for which we stand, reminding us of those things at home and representing them abroad. We number among those things fairness, tolerance and love of this country. It is a role only an Australian can fill... Each and every Australian should be able to aspire to be our Head of State. Every Australian should know that the office will always be filled by a citizen of high standing who has made an outstanding contribution to Australia and who, in making it, has enlarged our view of what it is to be Australian.³⁴

Complicating the debate are issues of sectarianism and class. Monarchism and republicanism have tended to majority supported by rival Christian confession, with monarchy the choice of Protestants of British background and republicanism the choice of Catholics, mostly originating from Ireland. Some observers believe the sectarian divide influenced the debate in the run-up to the 1999 referendum on republicanism, others think that these religious differences have played little part in Australian cultural and political life since the 1960s. More relevant cleavages in the debate are perhaps those of class and geography. The strongest republican attitudes tend to be found in the urban working class, especially that of Irish ancestry, while monarchism gets its strongest support in rural areas and among the middle class generally.

³⁴ Text from Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating's speech delivered to the House of Representatives on June 7, 1997.

3.4) The Cultural Cringe

The debate about republicanism is about far more than the question of who should be the Australian head of state. In fact it taps deep seated feelings about status and self-respect, the negative side of which has become known as the cultural cringe which a dictionary defines as “a sense of embarrassment caused by a feeling that your national culture is inferior to others.” The Australian literary critic H. P. Heseltine defined it as “unthinking admiration for everything foreign (especially English) which precluded respect for any excellence that might be found at home.”³⁵ Basically, the cultural cringe could be defined as a widely shared feeling amongst Australians that their culture was in some way second-rate, compared with its European and specifically British counterparts. The prevalence of this cultural alienation has heavily influenced Australian national consciousness.

The origins of the cringe are debatable. A.A. Phillips, who coined the term, believed that Australia’s short history was to blame. But the nature of that history, particularly Australia’s origin as a penal colony, has also played a role. The country’s early history left a manifestation of the cringe known as the “Convict Stain,” which persisted for many decades after the end of transportation. Basically it was a form of mass social embarrassment—and sometimes discrimination, for example the Melbourne Cricket Club would not admit anyone as a member with convict ancestor—about the origins of the country which led to disparagement of it, a lack of faith in its abilities, and a reluctance to examine the past. For many years Australia’s historical heritage was seen as decidedly ambiguous, and one reason for the valorization of Anzac Day was effect a wiping out of the “stain.” The legacy of the convict system, wrote Robert Hughes: in *The Fatal Shore* was not “the sturdy, skeptical independence on which, with gradually waning justification, we pride ourselves, but an intense concern with social and political respectability. One of the reasons why Australians after 1918 embraced with such deep emotion the mystic event of Gallipoli, our Thermopylae, was that there seemed to be so little in our early history to which we could point with pride.”

This “intense concern for social and political respectability,” led to Australia consciously looking to Britain, the Eden of respectability from which the fallen convicts had been expelled, to provide it with cultural models and for many decades it seemed that

³⁵ Introduction to Phillips, A.A. (1980) *The Australian Tradition*, Melbourne: Longman, pvii

a British—today an American—nod of approval was needed for Australians to deem their own cultural products to have worth. This meant that for ambitious Australians, a period of study or work overseas was *de rigueur*, British- or European-born job applicants would be given preferential treatment when applying for jobs, with only those Australians who had worked in London being treated as worthy of appointment or promotion. The civil service was, until well into the late 20th century, staffed mainly by expatriate British as were important cultural organizations. It is indicative of the power of the cringe that until the 1970s, people with Australian accents were not allowed to be newsreaders on the state-controlled Australian Broadcasting Corporation. ABC newsreaders had to speak with a British accent.

It is interesting to note in passing that while Australians claim that the cultural cringe is dead, and wax lyrical about the nation's self-confidence, this can in fact develop into a form of belligerent assertiveness about the value of Australian cultural values which, if anything, only goes to show the power the cringe still exerts.

