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# The White Australia Policy, the British Empire, and the World

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*The White Australia Policy, the British Empire, and the World*

*David C. Atkinson*

In an editorial published during the Australian Commonwealth's first federal election in March 1901, the *Sydney Morning Herald* expressed support for the legislative exclusion of Chinese, 'Hindoos', and 'men of other Eastern races' from the new dominion. Preventing large-scale Asian immigration constituted one of federation's prime motivations, after all, and inaction augured only misery and ruin. 'The experience of all countries shows the danger of unrestricted coloured immigration', the *Herald's* editorialists opined, 'and if we are to have "a white Australia", the Federal Parliament must devote its attention to the matter at an early stage'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, the *Herald* editorialists also recognised the complex imperial and international sensitivities inherent in Australian attempts to explicitly restrict Asian immigration. The key point, expressed in a June 1901 editorial, was that 'while we remain integral parts of the Empire we cannot expect to be able to legislate freely against our fellow subjects or the subjects of powerful and sensitive states'.<sup>2</sup> The reference to 'fellow subjects' signified South Asians from the Indian subcontinent, while the 'subjects of powerful and sensitive states' obliquely indicated Japanese migrants from Britain's increasingly important partner against Russian expansion in East Asia. As the *Herald's* conflicting—and indeed conflicted—editorials illustrate, the implementation of Asian restriction in Australia entailed a practically intractable predicament. On one hand federation afforded the opportunity to finally enact a consistent and well-defined system of Asian exclusion and white citizenship across the entire Australian continent. On the other hand, however, Australians remained constitutionally obligated to respect the priorities of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Undesirable Immigrants', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March, 1901, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> 'Coloured Labour', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June, 1901, p. 4.

British foreign and imperial policy, which in turn necessitated a sensitive and discreet immigration policy.<sup>3</sup>

This article examines the essential imperial and international context of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, and argues that the foundational deliberations that produced the White Australia Policy cannot be fully understood without attention to that global perspective. Indeed, the real and potential implications of Asian restriction beyond the Australian continent dominated the parliamentary debates and influenced the character and application of the policy from the outset. The debate was not about *whether* to implement a restrictive immigration regime, it was about *how* to implement that regime, a calculus suffused with a range of imperial and international considerations. It hinged upon Labor Party leader John C. Watson's popular amendment, which scorned the Natal formula's discretion and instead expressly excluded 'any person who is an aboriginal native of Asia, Africa, or of the islands thereof'. The question of whether to risk embarrassing the British, Japanese, and Chinese governments by enacting open and explicit restriction—as advocated by proponents of the Watson amendment—or whether to disguise the legislation's intent and spare Britain's sensibilities along with the prestige of its friends, colonies, and partners—as preferred by Edmund Barton's Protectionist Ministry and the Colonial and Foreign Offices in London—therefore guided the discussion. Ultimately, the Barton government's indulgence of the Natal formula was vigorously contested and the central device at the core of the White Australia Policy—the notorious literacy test—was never a foregone conclusion. This illustrates that while the White Australia Policy was a racialized act of 'self-conscious nation building', as John Fitzgerald argues, it was also a consciously and

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Alomes, *A Nation At Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism, 1880-1988* (North Ryde, NSW: 1988), p. 39; David Day, *Claiming a Continent: A New History of Australia* (Sydney: 2005), p. 177.

deliberately imperial and international act that imparted a distinctly global inflection to the Australian nation building project at its inception.<sup>4</sup>

Existing studies of the White Australia Policy offer a mostly cursory discussion of the extent to which members of the first Commonwealth Parliament purposefully framed and vigorously debated their actions in the wider global context of British imperial and foreign policy. That indispensable context is often simply asserted rather than unraveled and analyzed. The influence of Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and his favored Natal formula is well known, but the fact that Commonwealth legislators adopted this policy only after a turbulent debate has received much less scholarly attention. That character of that debate is important because it reveals the extent to which imperial and international concerns influenced Australian legislators as they enacted Asian immigration restriction in 1901.

Histories of the White Australia Policy's institution—from the first studies by Myra Willard, A.T. Yarwood, and H.I. London, to later contributions by James Jupp and Keith Windschuttle—tend to only allude to the Immigration Restriction Bill's global connotations. Much of the analysis instead focuses on legislators' domestic rationales and motivations.<sup>5</sup> Willard barely acknowledges the broader imperial and international content or contentiousness of the debates in her important early account. Yarwood likewise offers a short but useful overview of Japanese intercessions during the deliberations, yet his discussion of the actual debates remains focused upon the Immigration Restriction Bill's racial and economic dimensions. He even goes so far as to suggest that the White Australia Policy actually limited international discord by 'preventing the growth of minorities whose presence might have led to

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<sup>4</sup> John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: 2007), p. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> For a superb overview of these debates see Matthew Jordan, 'Rewriting Australia's Racist Past: How Historians (Mis)Interpret the White Australia Policy', *History Compass*, 3 (1), 2005.

recurring diplomatic crises'. Similarly, H.I. London's brief overview of the legislation's development recognizes the later diplomatic burdens engendered by the White Australia fantasy, but presents them as largely a feature of the post-Second World War era.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the assertions of Yarwood and London, the White Australia Policy in fact constituted a diplomatic millstone for both Australia and Great Britain from its inception in 1901, as the formative debates examined in this article reveal.

The White Australia Policy's broader global context not surprisingly receives more attention in recent explicitly transnational studies by scholars such as Robert Huttenback, Andrew Markus, Adam McKeown, and Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds. Yet even these avowedly global accounts largely just allude to the international scope and character of the 1901 debates without analyzing their content and consequences. Lake and Reynolds offer a brief overview of the issues raised by legislators, diplomats, and imperial officials during those formative deliberations, but they do not dwell on the full scope and nuance of the discussions. The same can be said of Huttenback's earlier history of discriminatory immigration policies in the British settler colonies, which barely addresses the seminal Australian debate at all, while McKeown's otherwise comprehensive global history of Chinese migration controls does not scrutinize the Australian deliberations at all.<sup>7</sup> Much of the other recent scholarship on Asian

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<sup>6</sup> Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920* (New York, 1968), 119-125; A.T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia: The Background to Exclusion* (London, 1967), 22-41 & 83; H. I. London, *Non-White Immigration and the 'White Australia' Policy* (Sydney, 1970), 13 & 205-228. Windschuttle is right that scholars should interrogate the actual debates, but his own work remains solely concerned with debunking decades of careful scholarship and undermining the modern Labor Party. Keith Windschuttle, *The White Australia Policy* (Sydney, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Huttenback, *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies, 1830-1910* (Ithaca, NY: 1976), 279-285; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: 2008), 147-150; Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: 2008), 194-196; Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901* (Sydney, 1979). See also Jane Carey and Claire McLisky, editors, *Creating White Australia* (Sydney: 2009). Sean Brawley also clearly recognises the international dimensions of Asian migration restriction, but he situates his analysis in the aftermath of the First

immigration is concerned with recovering the agency, experiences, and communities of the migrants themselves, rather than the policies that attempted to constrain migrant mobility and engagement with Australian society.<sup>8</sup>

Never simply a question of internal policy, debates over the White Australia policy's implementation in 1901 illustrate the complex and deeply antagonistic imperial and international politics engendered by the Australian Commonwealth's Asian restriction regime. As the enormous new federation heaved itself into the twentieth century, Australians entered a tentative political space between colony and nation; self-governing in domestic matters but beholden to British authority in imperial and foreign affairs. This enduring ambiguity made one of federation's most urgent objectives—continental immigration control—difficult to achieve. The new Commonwealth was bound to an international and imperial system directed by Great Britain and subject to the imperatives of British foreign and imperial policy. The ongoing issue of Asian migration also ensured Australians' continued global engagement, whether they liked it or not. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* melodramatically opined on federation day, 'there are many millions of coloured fellow-subjects of our own in India, Japan is looking for an outlet for its surplus population by emigration, and the Chinese question is always more or less with us'.<sup>9</sup> By subjecting the formative parliamentary debates to a sustained analysis that is largely absent from existing accounts—and by supplementing those debates with contemporary diplomatic and imperial correspondence from the Australian and British archives—this article reveals the full

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World War. Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America, 1919-1978* (Sydney: 1995).

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview of this innovative and enriching scholarship Keir Reeves & Benjamin Mountford, 'Sojourning and Settling: Locating Chinese Australian History', *Australian Historical Studies*, 42:1: 111-125. See also Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*.

<sup>9</sup> 'Federation and Our Exterior Relations', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January, 1901, p. 7.

depth and extent to which global considerations influenced the White Australia Policy at its moment of genesis.

### ***The Origins of the White Australia Policy and the Natal Formula***

White colonists had pursued Asian exclusion measures ever since Chinese labourers first arrived on the goldfields of New South Wales and Victoria in the 1850s. Throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth-century, anti-Asian activists projected an array of racial, economic, cultural, and strategic anxieties onto Asian migrants, whom they imagined would deluge and overwhelm the sparsely populated southern continent. Victorian legislators acted first in 1855, implementing a head tax on Chinese entering the colony and imposing limits on the number of Chinese that could legally be carried by each arriving vessel. The parliaments of South Australia and New South Wales enacted similar provisions in 1857 and 1861 respectively. Attempts at comprehensive exclusion nevertheless faltered during the colonial era in the absence of a continent-wide policy. Prospective immigrants circumvented individual colonies' restrictions by entering at unrestricted ports elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> It would be almost three decades before Australian colonists finally cooperated on a continent-wide system of restriction.<sup>11</sup>

The British government immediately intervened once it became clear that colonial legislators were determined to collaboratively implement harsh restrictions upon Chinese immigration in 1888. Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Knutsford, admitted the colonists' right to control their domestic affairs, but he also encouraged them to approach restriction with respect for British diplomatic and imperial sensitivities. Most importantly, he urged that colonial

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations* (St Leonard's, NSW: 1994), p. 67-68; Day, *Claiming a Continent*, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, p. 69; Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built*, pp. 189-90 & pp. 195-97; Huttenback, *Racism and Empire*, pp. 115.

governments should avoid explicitly excluding Chinese immigration on the basis of race, since this was bound to offend the Qing government and its people.<sup>12</sup> This remained the imperial government's steadfast position in the years that followed whenever the subject of Asian restriction arose.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese migrants confronted pervasive limitations on their immigration, settlement, and employment in Australia (and elsewhere in the British Empire).<sup>13</sup> Not content with simply excluding China's millions, however, defenders of Australian whiteness now turned their attention to a supposedly greater alien threat. Colonial leaders concluded that innumerable Japanese and Indian migrants also craved entry and they urged legislative action to stem this potentially overwhelming tide. The imperial and international consequences of expanding immigration restrictions to encompass Japanese and Indian labourers proved extremely challenging. From the imperial perspective, the Indian Viceroy in Calcutta, the India and Colonial Offices in London, and Indian immigrants themselves all interceded against colonial discrimination policies. Diplomatically, the Japanese Foreign Ministry and its consuls in the major Australian cities and towns joined the British Foreign Office and Colonial Office in urging restraint.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, famously attempted to ameliorate these growing tensions at the 1897 Conference of Colonial Premiers in London by advocating the adoption of the so-called Natal formula. That subterfuge—based on a policy enacted by the government of Natal earlier that year—eschewed explicit racial exclusion, ostensibly assuaging British, Indian, Japanese, and Chinese objections. The Natal test instead

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<sup>12</sup> Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Charles A. Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836-1888* (Canberra, 1974).

forced prospective immigrants—regardless of race—to transcribe a passage in English. Immigration officials adjudicated the potential immigrant’s language facility and could therefore surreptitiously exclude Asians on educational rather than racial grounds.<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain’s compromise mitigated the most tactless insensitivities of colonial prejudice, but Australian legislators only reluctantly incorporated the Natal formula into their expanded immigration restriction regime in 1901 as the following discussion demonstrates. They did so under duress from British, Japanese, and Indian representatives.

When federation finally came, the overwhelming majority of Australia’s first parliament agreed with Barton that Asian immigration must be subject to restriction, and that support cut across every social, political, and economic affiliation. The question hinged upon how to implement that restriction, and it was here that partisan loyalties took some unexpected twists. The first parliament saw Barton’s Protectionist Party in a governing coalition with J.C. Watson’s Labor Party. Free Traders—largely pro-business representatives—stood in practical opposition, led by George Reid. Barton’s Protectionist-Labor coalition nevertheless cleaved immediately on the question of support for the Natal formula. The prime minister’s fellow Protectionists lined up in favor of the Natal formula with only two exceptions, while Labor M.P.s voted unanimously for their leader’s amendment. It would be left to Free Traders, who were almost evenly split, to cast the deciding ballots.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Natal Formula versus Explicit Racial Exclusion***

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the Natal formula see McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, pp. 192-94.

<sup>15</sup> Russel Ward, *A Nation For a Continent* (Richmond, Victoria: 1977), p. 12-20; For a discussion of the domestic political breakdown of the final vote see Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia*, pp. 28-30.

Arguments over the potential imperial and international implications of Asian immigration restriction saturated and framed the debate over enacting the White Australia Policy in late 1901. Explicit and forthright exclusion based upon race—a strategy favored by a considerable number of legislators—threatened to strain Australia’s relationship with Great Britain. Imperial authorities in London, Calcutta, and elsewhere could not countenance outright racist regulations against subjects of Britain’s larger (and largely non-white) empire, nor would the British Foreign Office tolerate slights against subjects of British allies and partners abroad. And yet there were those in the Australian Parliament who believed that any prevarication on the subject of Asian exclusion promised only disaster for the Commonwealth and its status as a self-governing colony founded upon bedrock principles of white political and economic citizenship. A strong British Empire, they claimed, would not benefit from a racially heterogeneous Australia. From its inception, then, the White Australia Policy was a source of contention and anxiety not only in Australian politics, but also in British imperial and international politics. These contrasting realities stood at the crux of most of the arguments over the Immigration Restriction Bill, and manifested in a choice between two competing forms of restriction: the imperial government’s preferred Natal formula, and the Australian Labor Party leadership’s proposed amendment that outlawed Asian immigration on explicit racial grounds.

Barton introduced the Immigration Restriction Bill on August 7, 1901, and he was candid about its intent. From a practical point of view parliament had to consolidate the six pre-federation colonies’ immigration policies into one central act. Just as importantly, Barton emphasized the supposed racial threat that unrestricted Asian immigration posed to the newly federated Commonwealth. Quoting from Charles H. Pearson’s 1893 book *National Life and Character*, Barton proclaimed that ‘we are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher

racess can live and increase freely for the higher civilization'. According to Pearson, the dominant white races would eventually face an unassailable racial, economic, and diplomatic challenge from nonwhites, whereupon whites would 'wake to find ourselves elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we looked down upon as servile, and thought of as bound always to minister to our needs'.<sup>16</sup> From Barton's perspective, then, this was the broader challenge that white Australians were destined to meet, not only on behalf of the Commonwealth's future generations but also for the welfare of the world's white races.<sup>17</sup>

Barton nevertheless committed his government to Chamberlain's Natal formula despite these unambiguous principles. He did so in deference to Britain's global interests. If legislators imposed an explicit proscription method in defiance of Britain's myriad relationships throughout the empire and around the world, he argued, then imperial authorities would simply refuse to grant their assent. International and imperial opposition was assured, Barton affirmed, 'the moment we begin to say that every one of a certain nationality or colour shall be restricted'.<sup>18</sup> In particular, he believed that Australians should not 'make discriminations which will complicate the foreign relations of the Empire'. Barton nevertheless reassured his colleagues that his government would reinforce the act if the literacy test proved ineffective.<sup>19</sup>

Many legislators nevertheless rejected this indirect approach and instead endorsed the explicit legislative exclusion of Asian immigrants regardless of the potential imperial and international complications. The opposition coalesced around an amendment proposed by

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<sup>16</sup> *CPD, Volume III*, August 7, 1901, 3497-3503. For an excellent discussion of Pearson's influence see Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, pp. 75-94.

<sup>17</sup> Barton did not hide his racial views. As he would later affirm: 'There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races—I think no one wants convincing of this fact—unequal and inferior.' In short, 'the doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman.' *CPD, Volume IV*, 26 September, 1901, p. 5233.

<sup>18</sup> *CPD, Volume III*, 7 August, 1901, p. 3500.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3502-03.

Labour Party leader John C. Watson. Watson's amendment scorned the Natal formula's discretion and instead expressly excluded 'any person who is an aboriginal native of Asia, Africa, or of the islands thereof'. According to its many supporters, this direct strategy eliminated any doubt as to the legislation's intended targets and provided an unyielding safeguard against unwanted immigrants.

### ***The Immigration Restriction Bill and Imperial Politics***

The choice between the Natal formula's deception and the Watson amendment's forthright exclusion dominated the rest of the parliamentary debates, and pitted consideration for Britain's imperial and international obligations against the purported racial purity of the new Australian Commonwealth. It was difficult for advocates of the Watson amendment to justify disdain for the imperatives and responsibilities of British imperial politics. Some of them tried anyway. Indeed, proponents of Watson's impolitic amendment made a number of strenuous arguments in favor of jettisoning the Natal formula, even in defiance of the British government's imperial obligations.

During the debate's first speech on September 6, 1901, the deputy leader of the Free Trade Party, Sir William McMillan, denounced the Barton Ministry's embrace of Chamberlain's literacy test as 'an absolute fraud' and vigorously defended the Watson amendment's candor. It was in the empire's interests to unequivocally protect Australian whiteness given the exposed position of the Dominion in the southern reaches of the Pacific Ocean:

I hold that if we are perfectly sure that a certain policy is necessary to uphold the purity of the race in Australia...I do not think we should hesitate, for one moment, under the peculiar circumstances of the case—with our position in these south-eastern seas, open to millions of these servile and alien people—to say to Great Britain, "This is a problem which you and we have to face, and the more honestly we face it the better for the future".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *CPD, Volume IV*, 6 September, 1901, pp. 4626-27.

McMillan resented his government's equivocation on 'a matter of life and death to the purity of our race and the future of our nation'. According to McMillan, Great Britain would simply have to recognize the magnitude of the racial threats facing their southern dominion.<sup>21</sup> Although a member of Barton's Protectionist Party, Samuel Mauger also supported the Watson amendment and race loomed large in his rationale. He accepted that fears of economic competition were justified, but his primary concern was 'the possibility and probability of racial contamination'. Moreover, he contended that the British government's objections on imperial grounds were misplaced. Constitutionally, Indians were merely subjects in contrast to Australians who were also citizens, he argued.<sup>22</sup> This presumably circumscribed the rights of Indians to protest their treatment.

Many Members of Parliament in fact doubted that Great Britain would actually veto legislation that prohibited non-white immigration outright. They had to know that a white Australia was exponentially more valuable to the empire than a continent overwhelmed by surplus Asian labor. Another Protectionist representative, James Hume Cook, for example, demanded 'for the safety of the Australian nation, for the good of her national life, we require that Australia shall be white. Do honorable members think that Great Britain does not recognize our aspirations in this regard, and that she will not grant us what we want?' From his perspective parliament could safely adopt the Watson amendment without fear of British retribution as long as they stated their case firmly and unambiguously. After all, Australians themselves were best 'able to appreciate the danger of these vast hordes.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4629.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4633-34.

<sup>23</sup> *CPD, Volume IV*, 6 September, 1901, pp. 4640-41.

The Labor Party's King O'Malley also opposed the Natal formula and supported explicit exclusion. O'Malley believed the Natal formula would inevitably fail and the problem would emerge with greater ferocity in the future. The proposed dictation test merely postponed settlement of the issue. He echoed Barton's claim of Australian exceptionalism, adding God's imprimatur to the Commonwealth's racial mission: 'we are here upon a continent set apart by the Creator exclusively for a Southern empire—for a Southern nation—and it is our duty to preserve this island continent for all eternity to the white race, irrespective of where they may come from.'<sup>24</sup> American by birth, O'Malley brought a unique perspective to the debate. He drew a direct analogy between Australia's potential racial future and what he imagined constituted the United States' actual racial past:

If the Australian people had only lived in the Southern states of America—as I have—and had seen the dire results of the present mingling of the Africans with the whites, they would put their feet down and say—"We are going to profit by the terrible mistake of the American people, and we are not going to leave it to posterity to solve such an unholy problem".

In fact, for many Australian officials the Immigration Restriction Act represented the newly-constituted Commonwealth's sole guarantee of national survival and by implication its continued benefit to the empire. As debate raged in Parliament, for example, Queensland's Agent-General in London, Sir Horace Tozer, insisted that Japanese immigration represented a dire threat to Australia's continued existence as a British colony. While recognizing the immigration question's economic aspects, Tozer also claimed that 'in their military schools the Japanese make no secret of their ultimate aims to acquire territory in Australia.' The White

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 4638-39.

Australia policy had profound significance, therefore, since ‘the policy of Australia to prevent them getting a foothold sufficient to assist their plans of conquest is of national importance.’<sup>25</sup>

Despite this intensifying cross-party chorus, a slender majority of legislators opposed the audacity of the Watson amendment and decried their colleagues’ flippancy toward British imperial interests. Free Trade Party M.P. William Knox, for example, supported the Natal formula even though he admitted the magnitude of the ‘Yellow Danger’. But this was all the more reason to heed the imperial government’s interests. Australia was defenseless against the covetous intrigues of her Asian neighbors without the Royal Navy’s protection: ‘where, in the name of all that is good and true, should we be in the face of these menaces at our northern shores, if we had not the British Government to fall back on?’<sup>26</sup> Discounting Britain’s request for moderation would invite tragedy, Knox counseled, assuring the very calamity that Australians most feared.

Fellow Free Trader Frederick William Piesse also rejected the Watson amendment while still invoking a racial motivation for the Natal formula. Piesse eschewed his colleague’s typical evocation of American racial strife and instead cited an imperial analogy. Australia was presently at war with the South African Boers, he observed, who were at one time ‘the best and purest stock of European people’. This once pure race was now degraded, however, because they had ‘associated with an inferior people’. By virtue of living near black Africans, he reasoned, the formerly unadulterated Dutch Huguenots had vitiated their racial vitality. Here was another clear example, Piesse argued, of a white race polluted by its proximity to a savage and uncultured

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<sup>25</sup> ‘A White Australia’, Sir Horace Tozer, printed in ‘A Plea for a White Australia’, *Review of Reviews* (November, 1901), p. 507.

<sup>26</sup> *CPD, Volume IV*, 6 September, 1901, p. 4653.

people. White Australians could not afford a similar fate. The issue was therefore too urgent to delay passage of the government's legislation by risking British reservation.<sup>27</sup>

Despite widespread support, the Watson amendment was narrowly defeated by a 36-31 vote. The British government expressed satisfaction following the amendment's rejection and the Natal formula's triumph, despite the rancor that filled the Australian *Hansard*. The Colonial Office needed no reminder of how vitriolic the debate had been. As the Australian Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, informed the Colonial Office 'the feeling in Australia...is so intense that I cannot blame my Government for having introduced a measure of this kind.'<sup>28</sup> And yet imperial authorities felt vindicated. Evidence of Chamberlain's complicity in this unfolding masquerade can be found in his response to a petition, sent to the Colonial Office on behalf of Victoria's Indian residents in the autumn of 1901. The petitioners expressed bewilderment at the British government's tacit approval of the immigration restriction bill, then still under debate in the Australian parliament. 'We cannot understand how it is that our own Government now wish to separate us from herself and to put us as strangers along with the outside nations of the world', they wrote, 'especially as it is very painful for us to be put along with the Chinese, who are a defeated and dying race'. They reminded Chamberlain of India's great sacrifices in defense of the empire. Indians had demonstrated their willingness 'to give their blood wherever the British Government has asked for water'. Their petition provides a rare glimpse into this debate's effect on Australia's small Indian community:

We are therefore greatly pained that there is so much talk about a white Australia. Is it our fault that the almighty God made us of dark-coloured skin, and are we (who are part of the Empire) to be cast off and put along with the Chinese and Japanese,

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4818.

<sup>28</sup> *The Self-Governing Dominions and Coloured Immigration*, by Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, July 1908. The National Archives; (hereafter NA), CO 886/1/1 Colonial Office: Dominions, Confidential Print. Dominions Nos 1 to 7 'Self-Governing Dominions and Coloured Immigration', Memorandum by Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, Head of the Dominions Department of the Colonial Office, 1907-1911, p. 31.

whilst there is no mention made of the Germans, Russians, French, Italians, or members of other outside nations? Have the outside nations given and done more for the British people than we have given and done? Do the members of Parliament consider the justice of this side of the question?<sup>29</sup>

Chamberlain offered a disingenuous response. He instructed the Australian Governor General to convey his appreciation of their concerns. At the same time, however, he stated the British government's opinion that the Immigration Restriction bill 'does not appear to cast any reflection upon any class of His Majesty's subjects.'<sup>30</sup> Australia's desultory acquiescence in the Natal formula had successfully limited British liability. The Australian government was equally deceitful in its response to the petitioners. In their view, a careful reading of the bill's provisions would demonstrate that 'it contains nothing which couples the Indian with the Chinese races, and that consequently there is no reason for pain on that score.'<sup>31</sup> A cursory reading of the parliamentary debates revealed otherwise.

### ***The Immigration Restriction Bill and International Politics***

Even as the newly-elected legislators of Australia's first parliament cast the Commonwealth's immigration restriction regime in this imperial context, they were also cognizant of the broader international implications of their actions. Two issues framed the broader diplomatic debate on the Immigration Restriction Bill. Great Britain's relations with Japan loomed largest. If Australians insisted upon pursuing their white continental fantasy, it would have to do so at the expense of Japanese prestige. In addition, there were obvious

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<sup>29</sup> National Archives Australia (hereafter NAA): CA 7 Department of External Affairs [I]; A8, Correspondence Files [External Affairs], 1895-1905; 1902/182/1, Letter from Indian Residents in Victoria on the Immigration Restriction Bill, 25/10/1901. 'Petition, from Indian residents of Victoria, to The Right Honourable J. Chamberlain, Secretary for the Colonies, 25/10/1901'

<sup>30</sup> [Cover Memorandum] Chamberlain to the Earl of Hopetoun, 24 December, 1901. Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Effect of Immigration Restriction Bill on Indian Community, 19 November 1901, 1901/49/1. Ibid.

ramifications for Australians' nascent relations with Japan. These two issues were closely related given Australia's status as a British dominion whose foreign relations were administered by the imperial government, and Australians knew it. As future Australian Prime Minister William Morris Hughes declared during the debates, 'we want a white Australia, and are we to be denied it because we shall offend the Japanese or embarrass His Majesty's Ministers? I think not.'<sup>32</sup>

The Japanese government presented its case against the proposed immigration restriction bill before the legislative debates even began. The Japanese Consul in Sydney, H. Eitaki, was a constant antagonist of the Barton Ministry on immigration matters and a keen observer of parliamentary proceedings. Eitaki raised the issue with Barton in May 1901, stating the Japanese case against the anticipated legislation. Eitaki immediately challenged Australian racial assumptions with some of his own:

The Japanese belong to an Empire whose standard of civilization is so much higher than that of Kanakas, Negroes, Pacific Islanders, Indians, or other Eastern peoples, that to refer to them in the same terms cannot but be regarded in the light of a reproach, which is hardly warranted by the fact of the shade of the national complexion.

He further dismissed the widely held Australian conviction that Japan sought an outlet for its surplus population. Eitaki hoped, therefore, that Barton would exempt Japanese immigrants from the proposed bill.<sup>33</sup> In June 1901, Eitaki received the Japanese Minister's support in London, who lobbied the British Foreign Office to 'advise the Federal Government either to give up the presentation of such a bill or to eliminate therefrom [sic] the provisions unfair to Japanese subjects.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *CPD, Volume IV*, 12 September, 1901, p. 4822.

<sup>33</sup> H. Eitaki to Edmund Barton, 13 May, 1901; NAA, CA 7; A8, 1901/203/1, 'Correspondence with H. Eitaki; Acting Consul General for Japan, with reference to the Immigration Restriction Act, and admission of Japanese Subjects'. Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Baron Hayashi to the Marquess of Lansdowne, 4 July, 1901; 1901/27/9, 'Correspondence from Colonial Office re Japanese representations on Immigration Restriction Bill'. Ibid.

The Japanese government's appeals did not resonate in the Australian Parliament, but not because legislators did not understand their actions' international implications. In fact, Australian legislators demonstrated a keen understanding of Asian restriction's potential diplomatic complications. Regarding Anglo-Japanese relations and Australian-Japanese relations, Patrick Glynn of South Australia—a future minister of external affairs—neatly summed up the question: '[Chamberlain] does not wish to offend Japanese susceptibilities by raising the colour question; but the question is whether we are to subordinate our undoubted desire to prevent coloured immigrants from coming into Australia to the exigencies of Empire.'<sup>35</sup> Not only did Glynn favor the Watson amendment's explicit and direct approach, he also felt that Britain would accept it. Independent Labor member James Wilkinson was equally blunt in his judgment. 'Are we afraid of offending Japan?' he asked, 'shall we put our fear of offending Japan above our desire to have a pure Australian race comprised of the best-blood of Europe, which has made the British race what it is to-day?' Wilkinson did not believe Australians should place British and Japanese sensibilities above that cherished racial objective.<sup>36</sup>

Attorney General Alfred Deakin nevertheless gave one of the most impassioned speeches in support of the government's legislation and against the Watson amendment on international grounds. He admitted that parliament was unquestionably engaged in establishing a policy of world-historical significance. Furthermore, there was no question that Australia was to be a white man's country, and Deakin was confident that 'at the very first instant of our national career we are as one for a white Australia.' That policy, he declared, was to be 'the Monroe Doctrine of the Commonwealth of Australia.'<sup>37</sup> President James Monroe's 1823 declaration

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<sup>35</sup> *CPD*, Volume IV, 6 September, 1901, p. 4643.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4648.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4807.

warned Europe's imperial powers to respect the western hemisphere's independence. Australians were now claiming racial suzerainty over an entire continent. International observers had derided the former policy upon its promulgation in 1823, Deakin reminded his colleagues, yet eighty years later it was diplomatic orthodoxy. Australia's equally pretentious claims would meet with international ridicule, Deakin conceded. European observers would likely watch with

amazement when they regard what appears to be the arrogance of a handful of white men, most of them clustered on the eastern littoral of this immense continent, adopted before they have effectively occupied a quarter of the continent, and with the great bulk of its immense extent little more than explored or with a sparse European settlement.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Deakin counseled consideration of Japan's national pride and effusively praised Japan's recent economic, political, and military development. He insisted that it was the Japanese migrant's capacity for education, industriousness, and thrift that made them undesirable in Australia, since they threatened to displace white workers who demanded higher wages and better conditions. Deakin left no doubt that they ought to be excluded, but he was adamant that their exclusion had to be handled sensitively. 'When it becomes necessary for us to exclude people like the Japanese', he warned, 'it is reasonable that we should exclude them in the most considerate manner possible, and without conveying any idea that we have confused them with the many uneducated savages who visit our shores.' Deakin was aware that Japanese representatives like Eitaki were scrutinising the parliamentary debates. He was therefore eager to appease Japanese pride, recognizing that 'to lump all these peoples together as Asiatics and undesirables would naturally be offensive to a high-spirited people like the Japanese.'<sup>39</sup> The adoption of the Natal formula and rejection of the tactless Watson amendment constituted the only way to avoid injury to Japan and to ensure Australia's future as a white continent.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, 12 September, 1901, p. 4806.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 4812.

Supporting Barton and Deakin's position, fellow Protectionist party member James McCay succinctly articulated the Commonwealth's predicament. It was precisely because of British support that Australia could even contemplate offending Japan and without that support nobody would dare unnecessarily antagonise the Japanese. With that in mind, he suggested, legislators should be mindful of British objections. After all, McCay astutely observed, 'if we wish to enjoy the benefits of the [imperial] connexion we must also share its burdens.' Among those burdens was respect for Britain's global relationships. Richmond's Thomas Ewing concurred. His support for the government's position was simple: 'I stand by the Empire, because surrounded as Australia is by hundreds of millions of yellow men, she is powerless to play a lone hand. Without the protection of Great Britain she would be absolutely submerged and destroyed.'<sup>40</sup> Those flippant advocates of explicit prohibitions needed to accept this stark but pressing reality.

One of the most passionate speeches supporting the government's position came from future Chief Justice and Governor-General, Isaac Isaacs. Personally, Isaacs favored the Watson amendment's direct approach. His commitment to a white Australia was beyond reproach and he was eager 'to insure that Australia shall be white, and that we shall be free for all time from the contamination and the degrading influence of inferior races'. Nature had drawn the color line and the stakes, Isaacs argued, could not be higher:

I recognise to the fullest that here in Australia we have a white man's war. It is a struggle for life; it is a struggle for that higher and fuller life that all progressive nations must feel and share in. It is that struggle for victory over adverse circumstances which is the pride and glory of all advancing civilizations. It is a white man's war that we must face, and I would not suffer any black or tinted man to come in and block the path to progress. I would resist to the utmost, if it were necessary, any murky stream from disturbing the current of Australian life.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *CPD*, Volume IV, 26 September, 1901, p. 5250.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4845-46.

Nevertheless, he was sensitive to the imperial and international issues surrounding the question and he therefore supported the government's position. Instead of the Watson amendment, he favored appending an emergency provision to the government's bill empowering parliament to act if the literacy test proved inadequate. His amendment failed.

The irascible Labor Party firebrand Billy Hughes was less diplomatic. Without acknowledging Australia's own strategic dependence on the home government, Hughes mocked British opposition to the White Australia policy as selfishly strategic: 'it is notorious that to-day Great Britain stands almost without an ally. She is now driven into a corner, and she is dependent upon the support, tardy and reluctant, of Japan.'<sup>42</sup> Australians should not sacrifice their recently earned—albeit still circumscribed—autonomy because of British strategic concerns. 'We object to these people because of their vices, and of their immorality, and because of a hundred things which we can only hint at', Hughes pronounced, 'and our objections are not to be met by the declaration that the Imperial Government will be embarrassed by them.'<sup>43</sup> King O'Malley was similarly disposed to dispense with diplomatic niceties. 'Is it proper', he asked, 'that the rights of the Australian people should be sacrificed on the altar of foreign compromise?' The issue was simple: 'the Asiatic immigrant is nothing more or less than a coffee-coloured, copper-headed viper in the bosom of the Commonwealth, and if we do not kill that viper, that viper will kill us.' He would vote for the Watson amendment regardless of the international and imperial consequences.<sup>44</sup>

Fellow Laborite James Fowler proposed another, much subtler approach in support of the Watson amendment. The White Australia policy did not imply Australian racial superiority or

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 4821.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 4823.

<sup>44</sup> CPD, Volume IV, 26 September, 1901, p. 5276.

Japanese inferiority. It simply recognized differences in national character and a desire to preserve Australia's British heritage. This was an impulse common to all nations, Fowler insisted, and he felt confident that Japan would recognize this position. After all, he supposed, 'if the Japanese were threatened with an influx of foreign people in any such numbers as we in Australia are threatened with, they would no doubt feel thoroughly justified in taking the measures which we are about to adopt.'<sup>45</sup>

Tasmania's Norman Cameron—one of a small minority who opposed the White Australia policy irrespective of methods—understood the friction inherent in this ill-conceived declaration of continental whiteness. He highlighted the international considerations of alienating both Britain and Japan in one, ill-conceived, legislative assault. It was a distraction, he argued, from the real threat: 'why should we who are British do anything to cause a feeling of animosity or distrust to arise in the minds of the people of these two races who are our natural friends against our enemy, Russia?'<sup>46</sup> Another outright opponent of the legislation, Bruce Smith of Parkes, even challenged the premise that Asian immigration represented a threat to Australia: 'the public have been told over and over again that the purity and whiteness of the Australian Commonwealth is being endangered by the incursion of these hordes of Asiatics. I say that it is a fable; that it is altogether a fairy story.'<sup>47</sup> With faint praise, he deftly captured the absurdity of parliament's position: 'I think it is a humiliating confession to go forth to the world from one in so high a position that the truth is that we are afraid to come into contact and competition with a race like the Japanese.'<sup>48</sup> Such comparatively progressive statements were hardly calculated to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 12 September, 1901, p. 4833.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 4838.

<sup>47</sup> *CPD*, Volume IV, 25 September, 1901, p. 5160.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 5157.

assuage Japanese sensitivity and his colleagues rarely reciprocated his confidence in white Australians' racial vigor.

Australians, it turned out, did not have a voice in the matter. Indeed, Cameron and Hughes had astutely anticipated Britain's strategic dilemmas, inadvertently predicting one of the early twentieth-century's most shocking diplomatic developments. Unbeknownst to Australian legislators, throughout their deliberations British officials were secretly negotiating an alliance with Japan.<sup>49</sup> The alliance was designed to neutralize Russian expansion in Asia, of which both parties were increasingly suspicious. Informal negotiations between Britain and Japan began in April 1901, and formal negotiations commenced that October.<sup>50</sup> According to Ian Nish, however, 'it cannot be said that the Australian immigration crises in 1901 played any great part in modifying or delaying the alliance.' The alliance was simply too valuable to the Japanese.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, the Japanese Consul and the Japanese minister in London continued their exertions against discrimination. Predictably, Eitaki remained especially concerned by the Watson amendment but the proposed language change also troubled him. 'The English test', he reminded Barton 'was regarded as courteous to Japan, inasmuch as it placed her on an equal footing with other nations', The proposed change to 'any European language', however, was not:

I cannot imagine any sufficient reason why the Japanese language should not be regarded as upon the same footing with, say, the Turkish, the Russian, the Greek, the Polish, the Norwegian, the Austrian, or the Portuguese, or why, if an immigrant

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<sup>49</sup> Ian Nish, 'Australia and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1901-1911', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 9, no. 2 (November 1963): pp. 202-203.

<sup>50</sup> Murashima Shigeru, 'The Opening of the Twentieth Century and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1895-1923' in *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, Volume I: The Political-Diplomatic Dimension, 1600-1930*, eds. Ian Nish and Yoichi Kibata (New York: 2000), pp. 166-67.

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Nish points out, 'the Commonwealth government might congratulate itself on having passed the Immigration Restriction Act before, rather than after, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, otherwise Britain might have found it even more delicate to give assent to the Australian legislation'. Nish, 'Australia and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1901-1911', p. 204. Japan would, however, leverage the alliance in later years as it continued its struggle against colonial racism.

of any of the nationalities I have mentioned may be examined in his own language, the same courtesy should not be extended to a Japanese.<sup>52</sup>

Unable to elicit a satisfactory response from Barton, Eitaki turned to the Governor-General. The substitution of European for English was ‘racial, pure and simple’ he protested.<sup>53</sup> The Japanese Minister in London made similar representations to the British Foreign Office.<sup>54</sup> Eitaki kept his Foreign Ministry apprised of parliamentary debates, and Ambassador Hayashi was equally distressed by the proceedings’ tone. As he complained to the British Foreign Office, Australian legislators ‘explain that the measure imposes an educational qualification without distinction of race or colour’, yet at the same time ‘they couple it with such monstrous declarations’.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, in correspondence with the Foreign Office Chamberlain once again expressed his view that the European language stipulation wholly comported with the Natal formula. As such he could not interfere with Australia’s legislation.<sup>56</sup> As Chamberlain speciously told the Foreign Office, ‘[Hayashi] must take account of the words of the Bill itself, not of words uttered during debate which have no binding force whatsoever.’<sup>57</sup> In particular, Chamberlain was reportedly concerned that if Britain disallowed the bill, ‘the only result would be the passage of an even more drastic measure, framed with less consideration for the feelings of Japan, and possibly containing a direct prohibition of the entry of Japanese into Australia.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Eitaki to Edmund Barton, 16 September, 1901, pp. 1-2; NAA: A8, 1901/203/1, ‘Correspondence with H. Eitaki; Acting Consul General for Japan, with reference to the Immigration Restriction Act, and admission of Japanese Subjects’.

<sup>53</sup> Eitaki to the Earl of Hopetoun, 5 October, 1901. Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Baron Hayashi to the Marquess of Lansdowne, 7 October, 1901. Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Hayashi to the Marquess of Lansdowne, 16 December, 1901. TNA: FO 46/548, p. 444.

<sup>56</sup> H. Bertram Cox to the Foreign Office, 18 October, 1901. NAA: A8, 1901/203/1.

<sup>57</sup> Bertram Cox to the Foreign Office, 4 January, 1902. TNA: FO 46/670, Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before 1906, Japan, Immigration of Japanese into British Colonies, 1902-1905, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> The Self-Governing Dominions and Coloured Immigration, Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas, July 1908. TNA; CO 886/1/1, p. 31.

It was left to the British Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, to inform Hayashi that his government could not intercede with Australia on Japan's behalf. Based on an earlier argument articulated by Chamberlain, Lansdowne notified the Japanese Minister that the Immigration Restriction Act 'contains no sign of any discrimination and is essentially the same as the Natal Immigration Restriction Act, which the Japanese Government suggested as a model for Australian legislation'. Despite the many clear pronouncements to the contrary in parliament, Lansdowne was compelled to dismiss Japanese concerns.<sup>59</sup>

This did not prevent Japanese representatives from challenging the White Australia policy. It was especially clear to Eitaki and Hayashi that Australia's reluctant embrace of the Natal formula was nothing more than a facade. As Eitaki complained to Barton in 1902:

it is difficult indeed to understand, in the face of the existence of an Act whose test Clause provides for an examination 'in a European language', and whose passage was assisted (if not absolutely secured) by declarations from responsible Ministers that it was directly aimed at the Japanese, and would not be applied to white residents of European countries, how anyone can claim there is no discrimination against Japanese subjects in any Australian legislation.<sup>60</sup>

Sir Claude MacDonald, who replaced Ernest Satow as British Minister to Japan in 1900, also relayed Hayashi's continued protests to the Foreign Office in London. The Japanese government, MacDonald related, 'had at one time been ready to accept the basis of the Natal regulations'. They now recognized, however, that 'the educational test was likely to be used in such a manner as to discriminate against Japanese immigrants.'<sup>61</sup> Japan would continue its protests without significant success in the ensuing decades.

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<sup>59</sup> Marquess of Lansdowne to Hayashi, 8 February, 1902; NAA: CA 1, Governor General; A11816, Despatches and Correspondence from Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor General; p. 2, Despatches and other papers from Secretary of State to Governor General. Imposed numbers 53-84.

<sup>60</sup> Eitaki to Edmund Barton, 21 March, 1902. NAA: A8, 1901/203/1, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Sir Claude MacDonald to the Marquess of Lansdowne, 11 June, 1902. TNA: FO 46/670, Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before 1906, Japan, Immigration of Japanese into British Colonies, 1902-1905, pp. 79-80.

### *Conclusion*

The White Australia policy constituted a wellspring of imperial and international tensions from its inception. Enshrined in the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, Australian legislators designed this policy to restrict Asian immigration into their continental Commonwealth through the artifice of a literacy test based on the Natal government's 1897 ruse. The debates surrounding the act's establishment nevertheless reveal that Australian representatives understood their legislation's potentially disruptive imperial and international consequences. While most lawmakers supported Asian exclusion, they were deeply divided over how to achieve that goal. Many representatives rejected the Australian, British, and Japanese government's calls for restraint and advocated the explicit exclusion approach of the Watson Amendment, while others preferred to mitigate possible international friction by accepting the Natal formula.

This legislative sleight of hand ultimately ameliorated Australian legislators' most egregious impulses, but the White Australia Policy nevertheless ensnared Australia and Great Britain in a complex global drama that illustrates the entangled early-twentieth century politics of race, empire, and international relations. Australian acceptance of the Natal formula—and British acquiescence to the Immigration Restriction Act—in December 1901 did not resolve the issue of racially motivated immigration restriction in Australia or within the wider British Empire. Rather, it heralded the beginning of a prolonged imperial and international dispute concerning Asian immigrants' rights in the British colonies of settlement.<sup>62</sup> Australians, after all, were not alone in legislating against Asian immigration. Canada, New Zealand, and Natal all enacted similar legislation during this period. The Immigration Restriction Act may have

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<sup>62</sup> As described by Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*.

provided ‘a stone wall against the danger of race pollution’, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* hoped it would in September 1901, but it did not submerge the imperial and diplomatic tensions that afflicted it from the outset.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> ‘The Immigration Restriction Bill’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September, 1901, p. 6.