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Chapter **1**

Aussie, Aussie, Aussie

The first thing about Australian history that probably strikes you — aside from the very obvious exception of millennia of successful Indigenous adaptation — is that practically all of it is modern history. Getting your head around Australian history — what the big events were, and what the major forces shaping people's actions, reactions and various ideas were — means you also get your head around the major shifts and changes of the modern era. Australian history provides an invaluable window onto the flow of the modern era, while also being a pretty interesting story of the emergence of a distinctive nation in its own right.

The contrast between Australia being home to one of the longest continuing societies and most people thinking of Australian history in terms of only recent events is one thing. But another striking thing about Australia is that it is a land

and society of many more contrasts. The country was colonised as a place to punish people, yet being sent here often turned out to be the convicts' greatest opportunity. Australia was a place where British convicts were sent to be deprived of their rights, yet was one of the first places to bestow on men an almost universal right to vote (and, a few decades later, to almost all women). And, after Federation, Australia was set up as something of a 'new society,' yet was one that refused entry to non-Brits for most of the 20th century. The playing out of these contrasts adds to the depth and colour of the Australian story.

When Oldest Meets Newest

Australian modern history largely begins with the strange encounter between the oldest continuing culture in the world and the most rapidly changing one. The first Australians were Indigenous Aboriginals (see Chapter 2 for more on their way of life pre-European settlement). They were brought into contact with an invading group of settlers from an island on the other side of the world and off the west coast of Europe — Great Britain.



Explorer James Cook had been given a secret set of instructions to open only after he'd done his scientific work in Tahiti: Search for the elusive *Terra Australis Incognita*. If he found it, according to the instructions, he was then to 'with the consent of the natives take possession of convenient situations in the name of the King . . . or if you find the land uninhabited, take possession for His Majesty'.

Cook found the land inhabited — he even observed that, despite their apparent material lack, Aboriginals may be the happiest people on earth — but he then went ahead and claimed possession of the whole east coast of Australia anyway. As far as intercultural harmony went, this set an ominous tone for how Australia's first inhabitants would be viewed by the colonisers. Britain established the convict colony of New South Wales (NSW) shortly after. (See Chapter 3 for more on Cook and the decision to settle NSW.)

Getting ahead in the convict world

If I say to you the words 'convict colony', certain mental images probably automatically flash up. Chances are, they'd be pretty grim 'hellhole'-type images: A basic slave society with clanking chains and floggings.

Setting up a penal colony on the other side of the known world, with minimal chance of convicts returning to Britain once they'd served their time, certainly sounds like a recipe for disaster. But this is where the story of Australia gets interesting.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

According to English law, criminals usually lost most of their legal rights after being convicted for a crime — and they lost them permanently. They couldn't own property. They couldn't give evidence in court. If the original colony planners or early governors had really been set on making life in NSW as miserable as possible for transported convicts, the scope was there. But that's not what happened at all. In the new settlement, convicts not only kept their rights — they could own property, and could sue and give evidence in court — but they also became major economic players.

Convicts were allowed to retain legal rights and were given plenty of opportunities partly out of necessity: They were the vast majority of the population. How do you run a society where some 80 to 90 per cent of people can't hold property or talk in court? Convicts were the labour force (and the police force!), and they were the tradesmen and a large chunk of the entrepreneurial class. If you wanted to get anything done in this strange new colony, you had to see a convict about it. Indeed, if you wanted a *date*, you needed a convict. Most of the soldiers and officials had come out without womenfolk. While the soldiers and convict women entered into common-law partnerships (or de facto marriages), plenty of officers had relationships where convict women were their lovers and mistresses, sometimes even setting them up in businesses, having families and children with them, and occasionally even marrying them.



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

Economically, the new colony offered plenty of opportunities to make money, especially in importing and exporting — and, most notably, trading in alcohol for a very thirsty populace. Military officers, convicts and ex-convicts were all quick to get in on the act. None of them was super-scrupulous about how they did it, either.

By a weird quirk of fate, which neither transportation's administrators nor its detractors wanted publicised too much, getting caught, convicted and transported for crimes committed in Britain in the late 18th or early 19th centuries was frequently the luckiest break a criminal ever scored. (See Chapters 4 and 5 for more on the opportunities and second chances offered to new arrivals in NSW.)

Eventually, Britain got around to designing and building proper convict hellholes — at Port Arthur, Norfolk Island, Moreton Bay and Macquarie Harbour (see Chapter 6). But that took decades, and life in these places was never the reality for the majority of convicts.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The myth of NSW as a convict hellhole was at least in part a creation of free settlers. In the 1840s, plenty of now successful free settlers wanted to separate their new home from the stigma of convict association, so they dwelt on the horror of the exceptional places and practices — the chain-gangs, the isolated outposts designed for severe punishments — as if they were the usual thing. They weren't. But they created a myth that still shapes our thoughts about convict life.

Leaping into the big time with wool

At first, NSW was a trading and maritime colony. In 1808, 20 years after first settlement (and about the same time Governor Bligh was arrested by an extremely irritated populace — see Chapter 4) the population of the main port town, Sydney, was about half that of the entire colony. In the 1820s and 1830s, a real foothold finally started to be put down on the broader continent because of one main factor — the take-off of wool.

Australia's south-eastern grasslands, the end product of millennia of firestick farming burn-offs by Aboriginals (performed to attract kangaroos and other game to the new-growth grassland), were discovered to be perfect for grazing sheep on. And sheep grew wool. And wool was just what the new textile industries of Britain's industrial revolution wanted a lot of. (See Chapter 6 for more on the prosperity brought about by sheep farming and the land grab that followed.)



Not for the last time, Australia's jump into big-time prosperity had everything to do with high demand for raw materials from a nation flexing its muscles as a newly arrived industrial giant. (America, Japan and China would all play similar roles at different times in the 20th century.) Not for the last time, either, would a massive inward surge of investment capital make for a leveraging up of debt levels that meant when crunch time came, as crunch time tends to do, bankruptcies started popping up like toadstools everywhere (see Chapter 7).

Gold, Gold, Gold for Australia

At the end of the 1840s, Australia and the world were emerging from economic depression. Then along came the discovery of gold to dazzle everyone. The idea of getting your very own hands on a jackpot of wealth was what brought men and women to Australia in their hundreds and thousands in the 1850s, making for a transformation of colonial society.

Gold, an insanely profitable export, started being shipped out of the country, filling the treasuries of newly self-governing colonies as it did so. (This was in the days before Federation, when the states that now make up Australia acted as independent colonies.) And those who were lucky enough to have found gold and were newly cashed up had no shortage of things to spend their money on, as imports started flooding in. (See Chapter 8 for more on the gold rush and its effects.)

A building boom also followed. While the massive surge of new arrivals was happy enough to live in tents and canvas towns for the first few months, and makeshift shelters, shanties and lean-tos for another few years after that, ultimately they

wanted to live in proper houses — which all had to be built. As did roads. And schools for all the children being born. Then railways, telegraphs — why not?! ‘If the world has it, we shouldn’t lack for it’ was the generally agreed sentiment (see Chapter 9). Limitless progress, development and prosperity were there to be enjoyed. The newest inventions and technology were certain requirements as the ‘steam train of progress’ of the 19th century took off with rattling speed, with the colonies demanding to be in the front carriage.

Welcoming in male suffrage

Democracy was another accidental by-product of the gold rushes — although, at this stage, for ‘democracy’ read ‘votes for most men’. The Australian colonies were some of the very first places anywhere in the world to grant practically universal male *suffrage* (voting rights). (And, 40 to 50 years later, Australia would be one of the very first places to give votes to almost all women.)



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The granting of the right to vote to most men in the 1850s was one of those sublimely unexpected twists in Australian history. In Britain at the time, constraints were placed on who qualified for the *franchise* (that is, who was allowed to vote). Traditionally, those who owned large amounts of property or paid big amounts of rental qualified to vote. When Australian colonies were granted elected Legislative Councils, constraints similar to those operating in Britain were put in place. But what members of the British parliament didn’t know was that rents were much, much higher in Australian cities. Thanks to gold, everything had shot up — prices, wages, rents, the lot. Without realising it, the British parliament had set constraints that allowed a much higher proportion of men to vote than in Britain. So, without great agitation or publicity campaigns or fanfare, practically all men got the right to vote in elections that formed the colonial governments. Politicians changed their pitch and their promises accordingly. (See Chapter 8 for some of the initial political effects of the more universal male suffrage.)



LIFE DOWN
UNDER

Even after winning the vote, it seemed that many people in the colonies didn’t really *care* about politics. They hadn’t come here to vote, after all. They’d come here to get rich. And the ‘native-born’ white settler Australians were notoriously unconcerned about political life. Many newly arrived British immigrants were veterans of the great political struggles of 1840s Britain. They complained that all the locals seemed to care about (and here you’d better brace yourself for a bit of a shock) was making money, getting drunk, racing horses and playing sport. How un-Australian can you get?! Wait, better not answer that . . . (See Chapters 8 and 10 for more on how new immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s influenced colonial politics.)

So it turns out plenty of defining Australian characteristics were embedded in the culture of the place from very early on. What many people in the colonies wanted most tended to be plenty of leisure time to do with as they saw fit (see the sidebar ‘The great Australian leisure time experiment’).



THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN LEISURE TIME EXPERIMENT

In the period of the long boom that followed the gold rushes in Australia, one of the things that people began pushing for was more leisure time. The eight-hour working day movement was very successful (see Chapter 8), and workers often showed that if they had to choose between more pay (and more working hours) and less pay (and fewer working hours), they would choose the latter.

With this leisure time, many Australians started passionately playing sport and games. In 1858, what became known as Australian Rules, a uniquely colonial code of football, was developed. (In all likelihood, this code drew on an Indigenous game, perhaps Gaelic football and definitely the still-developing British codes of rugby and soccer). In 1861, the Melbourne Cup, the renowned 'race that stops the nation', started stopping the nation, with the race results being telegraphed to the rest of the colonies. By 1879, Melbourne Cup Day was a public holiday in Melbourne (as it still is today). From 1865, rugby was being played regularly in Sydney. (See Chapter 10 for more on the use of leisure time during the long boom and the development of different football codes in different colonies.)

Cricket was played everywhere, including by Indigenous Australians — with the first Australian cricket team to tour England being made up of 13 Aboriginal men. The (white) colonials proved so adept at picking up the game that they were able to defeat English teams first in 1877 in Melbourne then in 1880 in London. This provoked shock and consternation among the English, and some wag placed an obituary in the papers for English cricket, which, the obituary mockingly declared, had died at the Oval — its body was to be cremated and the ashes sent to Australia. These mythical 'ashes' of English cricket have been at stake in The Ashes series of test cricket matches between England and Australia ever since.

The crowds that came to watch these burgeoning spectator sports — particularly Australian Rules and the Melbourne Cup — showed a distinctively colonial disregard for old world rigid class distinctions. Workers, business owners, bankers and farmers, men and women — all mingled freely and barracked loudly.

Striving for the 'workingman's paradise'

From the early 1850s through to the late 1880s, Australia went through a long boom, and it was during this period that the phrase 'workingman's paradise' first began to be regularly applied. Obviously, a fair bit of grandiose hyperbole is associated with the phrase (hello — *paradise*?!) but it also contained an important element of truth.



Life for workers in Australia was dramatically better than what they were used to in Britain and other parts of the world. With all the demand for building, construction and the rest, unemployment was largely non-existent, the eight-hour day became almost the norm and pay rates were generally good. In Australia, an ordinary white male worker could work and put enough away in savings to eventually buy his own house — an impossible dream for most workers in Britain.

During the long boom, schooling began to be supplied by the state. It was compulsory (which had the effect of eliminating child labour) and *secular* (non-religious) to avoid playing favourites with the different religious denominations of different immigrants from Britain. Most remarkably of all, the schooling was free. Parents from all different classes started sending their children to the same schools, which had been precisely the legislators' intent. (See Chapter 10 for more on the politics and social reforms made during the 19th century long boom.)

For as long as the boom period sustained itself, the occasionally mentioned desire for *federation* — uniting the various self-governing colonies into one nation — struggled to gain much traction. Different citizens in different colonies would at times talk about intercolonial union, and politicians held tentative conferences. However, for as long as the passionate central beliefs of colonial Australia — progress, ever-increasing material wealth and chasing after the various luxury consumer goods that go with it — were able to be maintained, it was hard to stir up sufficient enthusiasm.



WAIT A SECOND! WHERE ARE THE EXPLORERS AND THE BUSHRANGERS?

Most people come to Australian history with a few embedded expectations. They expect convict life to be one of unrelenting hell. (Refer to the section 'Getting ahead in the convict world', earlier in this chapter, for how that one works out.) They also tend to think of colonial Australians as, if not explorers, gold diggers or bushrangers, at least living out on the backblocks of a ruggedly frontier life, struggling as *selectors* (farmers of small parcels of land) to eke out a barren existence on bad soil, or wrestling rams and clipping ewes as shearers. And, certainly, some people did things exactly like that, but most colonial Australians didn't. The most remarkable thing about colonial Australia, really, was not the exotic figures — the bushrangers, the explorers and so on — but how extraordinarily similar most people's lives were to what we're familiar with today.

Now, if you really like the explorers and bushrangers, don't worry! They're here in *Australian History For Dummies* also. Anyone who wants the lowdown on Burke and Wills, Ben Hall or Ned Kelly will be kept happy (see Chapter 9). But there's also the other question — what were most colonial Australians doing? The big unexpected answer is that by the 1860s, most Australians were living in the colonies' urban centres.

Luckily (for the future prospects of Australian federation), a devastating economic crash hit the colonies hard in the 1890s. The idea of inevitable progress, increased prosperity and constant social harmony was set firmly back on its heels, and a federated nation became much more attractive (see Chapter 11).

Solving the Problems of the World (By Keeping Out the World)

When depression hit in 1891, the sustaining ideas of the long boom — of ever-increasing abundance, technological advancement and continued riches — came undone. The assumption that old-world problems such as class antagonism had been solved turned out to be untrue, as seen in a series of savage strikes that broke out in the early 1890s — on the docks, in the shearing sheds and in the mines of Broken Hill. The various progressive colonial governments came down on the side of the bosses, sending in troops to maintain order and protect the rights and property of bosses and owners. ‘So much for the workingman’s paradise’, said the workers. ‘So much for social harmony and real progress’, said the middle class.



In the end, the middle classes had supported the decision of governments to send in troops against strikers to keep order and maintain public safety. However, they were furious about having to make such a choice at all. Colonial Australia wasn’t meant to be like that: Most people in Australia had spent 30 or so years proudly boasting that Australia was far too progressive to let things like that happen.

From the widespread disillusionment felt by many during the 1890s depression, a series of new factors emerged:

- » The union movement, which had seen its power largely broken in the strikes, decided it was time to form a political party, get voted into government and change the laws themselves to make them friendlier to workers. From this ideal, the Australian Labor Party was born (see Chapter 11) and, by the end of the first decade of the 1900s, had established itself as the dominant force in Australian politics.
- » Federation, the idea of forming a new country out of the old self-governing colonies, took on a new momentum after being kickstarted at the ‘people’s convention’ at Corowa on the Murray River in 1893. Federation succeeded largely as a powerful symbol of new unity — ‘a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation’ — which would help colonial Australians move beyond the divisions and struggles that had so divided sections of the community in the 1890s (see Chapter 11).

» The idea of a newly federated nation became not simply an end in itself but a means to establish a 'social laboratory'. Federation would allow Australia to insulate itself from the rest of the world and implement solutions to problems, such as worker–employer conflict and poverty. These problems were apparent in other modern nations (for example, in Britain, the US and France) and had recently become apparent in the colonies. Heavily restricting immigration (with the now-notorious White Australia Policy) and bringing in heavy *tariffs* (taxes, or customs duties) on overseas imports to protect local jobs and industries were both brought in during the first decade after Federation to achieve this insulation, as were many social reforms (see Chapter 12).

Now for War, Division, Depression and More War

At the start of the 20th century things looked good, really good, for the social laboratory of Federation, social harmony and Australian Labor. Then World War I hit. While the war provided a new national hero — the 'digger' soldier — and stories of national bravery, it proved to be a big disaster for Labor and the harmony of Australian society. This was followed, in seemingly quick succession, by the Great Depression and more war, with a brief period of big dreams during the 1920s.

Joining the Empire in the war

When World War I started, few Australians doubted that Australia would be in the war and on the side of Britain. But the war dragged on and on, with horrific casualty lists and a constantly rising number of deaths. Labor was in government, and had promised to fight 'to the last man and the last shilling' — before it became apparent that it actually might come to that. Unionists, who made up the bulk of Labor's support, started to mutter loudly that fighting foreign wars on behalf of foreign capitalists wasn't such a bright idea. Then, to make things worse, Ireland staged a rebellion in 1916.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

One of the biggest challenges in the Australian colonies had always been that its three main ethnic groups — English, Scottish and Irish, who had very long traditions of hating each other's guts — were forced to live cheek by jowl with each other, something they had very little experience with elsewhere. But this integration had been the young nation's greatest achievement.

But Ireland, and Britain's rule of it, had always been a touchy subject in Australia. Now, in the middle of world war, a rebellion broke out in Ireland and in Australia, support for Britain (read England) in the world war ceased to be unquestioned for many.

In the turmoil, the Labor Party split and lost government and spent most of the next 20 years as a political irrelevance, their one triumph the successful campaign against compulsory military service overseas. The ex-Labor prime minister, Billy Hughes, got huge support from the public for doing everything to win the war, and the Liberals, which he now led, claimed centrestage as the 'natural' choice for patriotic Australians.

Australia ended the war a far more divided and fractured place than it had been when the war began. The animosity felt between Irish Catholic Australians and the Anglo-Protestant majority would eat away at Australian unity for some 40 years. (See Chapter 13 for more on Australia's role during World War I and the tensions that emerged at home.)

Dreaming of 'Australia Unlimited'

By the end of World War I, Australia was profoundly divided and strangely schizoid. Everything was jagged and everyone was on edge — the number of strikes and working days lost peaked just after the war. 'Patriotism' was a far more loaded term, with many ex-soldiers resenting 'disloyals', who were deemed to have not done everything to support Australia's involvement in the war. Because these animosities often divided Australian society along religious, ethnic and class lines, the sense of rancour and of a nation divided was acute as the 1920s began.

Yet, the 1920s were also — in classic Charles Dickens 'best of times, worst of times' style — a period when Australia emerged as newly cocky about its prowess and capabilities on the world stage. Australia had 'proved itself' during World War I, and by the end of the conflict in 1918 had emerged as one of the elite fighting forces on the Western Front. A new expansive optimism began to prevail, which rekindled old dreams of exponential development and progress — and the ideal of 'Australia Unlimited' was born (see Chapter 14).



During the 1920s, Australia was frequently compared to the US, a country which appears about the same size as Australia on the map, but which had begun its history some 200 years earlier. Many argued America had blazed a trail that Australia could be expected to follow and emulate, and big plans began to be hatched. Enormous migration schemes were implemented (bringing in British migrants) and rural development projects begun. All this was largely funded by masses of government overseas borrowing, mostly from Britain.

Getting hit by the Great Depression . . .

After the dreams and excess of the 1920s came a doozie of a global economic depression, which began on the Wall Street stock market in New York and spread rapidly to take in most of the world. Australia, up to its eyeballs in debt at the same time as prices for its major export commodities such as wool and wheat were crashing through the floor, was acutely vulnerable.

When the economic crisis hit, the politicians and bankers proved themselves unable to agree on what measures should be followed. The Labor Party, which had the misfortune of regaining government for the first time since the end of World War I at about the exact same moment as Wall Street crashed, split for a second time within 20 years over the disagreement.

Unemployment trended upward to a peak of around 30 per cent. After the frenetic expansion years of the 1920s, and the pursuit of new enjoyments with new inventions such as automobiles, cinema and radio (see Chapter 14), ordinary people found themselves thrown back upon their own resources. Luxury items that had been considered essentials a few years previously were now eschewed, garden lawns were converted back to vegetable plots and broken items now found themselves being fixed rather than replaced. (See Chapter 15 for more on life in Australia during the Great Depression.)

. . . And another war

In 1939, Australians faced up to another world war, but this time one fought not only on faraway battlefields (as World War I had been) but also much closer to home. Japan's downward thrust meant that, for the first time in its history, Australia felt itself to be directly menaced with possible invasion. Darwin and other northern towns were repeatedly bombed but Britain, its hands full defeating Nazi Germany, was unable to send much in the way of help.

Luckily, America's interests and Australia's coincided: America needed a geographic base from which to launch a counteroffensive against Japan, and Australia needed the reassuring presence of a great and powerful ally. Australia geared its economy up to full capacity, converting all possible industries to war production. (See Chapter 16 for more on Australia's involvement in World War II and events back home.)

As the tide of the war turned, the Curtin Government began preparing postwar reconstruction plans. Along with implementing a bold new immigration scheme (for the first time taking in large numbers of European immigrants as well as those from Britain), considerable economic and social progress was made (see Chapter 17). This laid the groundwork that helped sustain an economic boom that

proved second only to the long boom of the 19th century for duration (see Chapter 18).

The Postwar Boom Broom

Prosperity unleashed a new generation — the postwar baby boomers — onto the world, coinciding with a social revolution in the 1960s. This younger generation had grown up in an era of prosperity and increasing material affluence — an experience quite unlike the Depression and war years in which their parents had reached maturity. The Beatles, miniskirts and tie-dye psychedelia — you have the 1960s to thank for them. The 1960s also spawned a series of social movements, including:

- » **Vietnam War protests:** Many in the baby-boomer generation refused point-blank to serve as conscripts or soldiers in the Vietnam War, which Australia had entered in 1962.
- » **Calls for the end of the White Australia Policy:** This policy was aimed at excluding non-whites from immigration into Australia (under the old social homogeneity argument or, as Labor minister Arthur Calwell unfortunately joked, the argument that 'Two Wongs don't make a White'.) By the 1960s, the policy was becoming increasingly odious to newly independent non-white nations. The policy was progressively dismantled from 1966.
- » **Campaigns for civil rights for Aboriginals:** Inspired by the civil rights movement for African Americans in the US, Indigenous Australians began agitating to have all constitutional bars against their full recognition as Australian citizens removed.
- » **Women's rights campaigns:** Liberated by access to a recently developed contraceptive ('the pill') and 'no-fault' divorce, Australian women began calling for equal rights, including equal payment for work done, the right to work after getting married or having children, and the removal of old segregation rules (such as those that fined pub owners for serving women in the front bar of pubs) that were starting to appear, quite frankly, a little archaic.

See Chapter 19 for more on the changes wreaked during the 1960s and 1970s in Australia.

Breaking Down the Fortress Australia Mentality

The ambition for pushing through and instituting great waves of social change came to a head under the government of Labor leader Gough Whitlam in 1972 to 1975 (see Chapter 19). Unfortunately for Gough, however, the economic good times of the postwar boom that had been sustaining the plans for social change came to an end during his prime ministership. The recession destroyed his government, as it did his successor, Liberal Malcolm Fraser.

The challenge of fixing the economic problems — including the special guest stars of high inflation, rising unemployment and declining industries — was so great that it took a concerted revision and ultimate termination of the original Fortress Australia economic policies first implemented early in the 1900s. This was a long period of sustained and largely unquestioned economic orthodoxy to up-end, but up-ended it was.

At the same time, another revolution was taking place — this one with a more multicultural flavour.

Opening up the economy

By the end of the 1980s, Australia had begun winding back tariffs used to protect uncompetitive industries. It had also opened up the financial market, and allowed the Australian dollar to ‘float’ and find its own level of value on international exchange markets rather than being kept fixed at an artificial and government-maintained level.



HISTORICAL
ROOTS

The ‘closed shop’ era was over, and in the early 1990s, Australia experienced acute economic trauma during what economists glibly labelled the ‘structural readjustment phase’, a phase that included the worst recession of the postwar era. But Australia emerged from the recession ready to take advantage of a new period of economic expansion, prosperity and growth. Thanks to the various economic reforms introduced through the 1980s and 1990s, Australia surprised many by weathering the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s the best of any country in the region. It was also well placed to take advantage of the China boom of the 2000s, and sail serenely through the global financial crisis of 2008. (See Chapter 20 for more on the changes introduced through the 1980s, and their short-term effects.)

Opening up the borders (mostly)

At the same time as the economic revolution, a sustained and at times ferocious debate was taking place over Australia's cultural direction. When the White Australia Policy had been dismantled in the 1960s, it was done with loud public reassurances that 'social homogeneity' continued to be the key ambition informing immigration policy. Australia was welcoming immigrants from many diverse and new parts of the world, but the job of the immigrants was to adjust and assimilate. The thought that Australia could be genuinely enriched by these diverse new arrivals was slow to dawn in policy circles.

The big turnaround took place in the late 1970s, when Malcolm Fraser launched a policy of multiculturalism and also began accepting large numbers of predominantly Asian migrants — refugees from the Vietnam War (see Chapter 20). The idea behind multiculturalism — that it was okay for immigrants to want to retain their own culture while living in Australia, and that Australia might actually benefit from these cultures — was a shift in Australia's approach to the world and its attitude to itself so profound as to be seismic.

By the late 1980s, the policy of multiculturalism was provoking murmurs of discontent. A report to the Hawke Labor Government concluded that the pendulum had now swung too far in the other direction — that many people were worried that embracing multiculturalism and diversity meant valuing and esteeming all other cultures and heritages but downgrading and devaluing Australia's own, the core British–Australian culture that had provided all the building blocks for modern Australia.



The tensions came to flashpoint in the late 1990s, when resentment against the economic changes of the 1980s, the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and suspicion about the influx of new immigrants coalesced into support for Pauline Hanson's 'One Nation' political movement. This movement combined nostalgia for the certainties of old Australia with the rejection of economic and social revolutions refashioning Australia. In the short-term it was a short-lived phenomenon, dissipating as economic circumstances improved and something resembling boom conditions returned to Australian life for the first time in 30 years. But it was also a harbinger of some of the debates and divisions which would challenge Australia in the 21st century as well.

Entering the New Millennium

The 21st century began just as Australia was emerging from hard times and into a new era of prosperity and widespread wealth. Thanks to the hard yards of economic reforms in the 1980s and 90s, from 2004 Australia was in a great position

to benefit by the China boom, China's dramatic economic development after joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001. This created huge demand for Australia's natural resources, as well as creating huge new markets for Australian education and tourism sectors. In significant part because of this Australia was able to avoid many of the disastrous problems that beset the north Atlantic countries in Europe and the US in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. In the 2010s though, China's geostrategic expansion began to create a host of new problems for its regional neighbours to wrestle with, and Australia has had to navigate these changing realities.

Aside from 'the China Question', other global challenges haven't been shy about imposing themselves. How best to deal with climate change continues to vex us, and has triggered the fall of Prime Ministers, Opposition leaders and whole governments. The Islamist attacks of September the 11th, 2001, (aka '9/11') was followed by another terror attack on Australian and other western tourists at Bali in October 2002. The 'War on Terror', and protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan was another by-product of the 2001 terror attacks, and have ensured argument amongst Australians on the rights and wrongs of this practically ever since. Whilst all this was happening other issues also demanded attention: Indigenous reconciliation, Same Sex Marriage, Asylum Seekers, sexual harassment of women, free speech and the freedom of religion have all elicited debate, much of which continues ongoing. And then there was that COVID thing . . .

As the third decade of the new millennium gets under way, the ongoing story of Australia is showing no signs of slowing up any time soon.

