

The making of White Australia:  
Ruling class agendas, 1876-1888

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I declare that the material contained in this thesis is entirely my own work,  
except where due and accurate acknowledgement of another source  
has been made.

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## Abbreviations

AJCP	Australian Joint Copying Project
ASN	Australasian Steam Navigation Co.
Col Sec	Colonial Secretary
MHA	Member of the House of Assembly (South Australia)
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of the Legislative Council
MP	Member of Parliament
NSW	New South Wales
NSW LA	New South Wales Legislative Assembly
NSWPD	<i>New South Wales Parliamentary Debates</i>
NT	Northern Territory
ORDLA	<i>Official Record of Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Qld)</i>
ORDLC	<i>Official Record of Debates of the Legislative Council (Qld)</i>
PRL	Political Reform League (NSW)
PRU	Political Reform Union (NSW)
Qld	Queensland
QPD	<i>Queensland Parliamentary Debates</i>
QSA	Queensland State Archives
QT	<i>Queensland Times (Ipswich)</i>
SA	South Australia
SAPD	<i>South Australian Parliamentary Debates</i>
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
Tas	Tasmania
TLC	Trades and Labour Council
V&P	<i>Votes and Proceedings</i>

Vic	Victoria
VPD	<i>Victorian Parliamentary Debates</i>
WMDA	Working Men's Defence Association (NSW)

## Abstract

This thesis argues that the colonial ruling class developed its first White Australia policy in 1888, creating most of the precedents for the federal legislation of 1901. White Australia was central to the making of the Australian working class, to the shaping of Australian nationalism, and the development of federal political institutions. It has long been understood as a product of labour movement mobilising, but this thesis rejects that approach, arguing that the labour movement lacked the power to impose such a fundamental national policy, and that the key decisions which led to White Australia were demonstrably not products of labour movement action.

It finds three great ruling class agendas behind the decisions to exclude Chinese immigrants, and severely limit the use of indentured “coloured labour”.

Chinese people were seen as a strategic threat to Anglo-Australian control of the continent, and this fear was sharpened in the mid-1880s when China was seen as a rising military power, and a necessary ally for Britain in its global rivalry with Russia. The second ruling class agenda was the building of a modern industrial economy, which might be threatened by industries resting on indentured labour in the north. The third agenda was the desire to construct an homogenous people, which was seen as necessary for containing social discontent and allowing “free institutions”, such as parliamentary democracy.

These agendas, and the ruling class interests behind them, challenged other major ruling class interests and ideologies. The result was a series of dilemmas and conflicts within the ruling class, and the resolution of these moved the colonial governments towards the White Australia policy of 1901. The thesis therefore describes the conflict over the use of Pacific Islanders by pastoralists in Queensland, the campaign for indentured Indian labour by sugar planters and the radical strategy of submerging this into a campaign for North Queensland separation, and the strike and anti-Chinese campaign in opposition to the use of Chinese workers by the Australasian Steam Navigation Company in 1878. The first White Australia policy of 1888 was the outcome of three separate struggles by the majority of the Anglo-Australian ruling class – to narrowly restrict the use of indentured labour in Queensland, to assert the right of the colonies to decide their collective immigration policies independently of Britain, and to force South Australia to accept the end of Chinese immigration into its Northern Territory. The dominant elements in the ruling class had already agreed that any serious move towards federation was to be conditional on the building of a white, predominantly British, population across the whole continent, and in 1888 they imposed that policy on their own societies and the British government.