

# Howard plays the racist card

**MOVE** over, Bruce Ruxton. Now the big boys want to play in the cess-pit of racial politics.

John Howard's announcement that his immigration policy won't be "totally non-discriminatory", and the Nationals' demand that "Asian immigration has to be slowed", marked an ugly lurch rightward in Australian public debate.

With Labor stealing his platform, Howard wants an issue to campaign on. Liberal polls say there is still a vein of White Australia racism to be mined, and Howard is digging for it.

He is using the time-worn excuse that our "social cohesion" is under threat. Geoffrey Blainey first ran this line four and a half years ago. Yet despite his attempt at self-fulfilling prophecy (usually the easiest kind) we have seen no race riots or serious anti-Asian mobilisation. The only threat to social cohesion has been from Blainey's own fans, as morons like Ron Casey and Nancy Wake crudely try to kick-start the race issue back to life.

That fact does not worry John Howard. He says that multiculturalism has been "hi-jacked" and puts forward a slogan of "One Australia". Anti-Asian letter-writers to the press have taken this up with glee, while in South East Asia it has rightly been dubbed the "One White Australia" policy.

The slogan is of course chauvinist drivel. The implication, that multiculturalism and Asians have divided society, is nonsense. On the contrary, Australia is a far more interesting place now than it was under the sterile, racist and sexist WASP culture that dominated until the 1960s.

Australia is divided, but by class, not race. The country belongs to a tiny minority, the Alan Bonds and Kerry Packers, and both Liberal and Labor are at one about widening the gap between them and the rest of us. "One Australia" is just a cynical hoax to get us to salute their flag, instead of identifying with the oppressed of Asia and other continents.

**HOWARD'S attempt to play the racist card highlights several things.**

One is the swinish hypocrisy of the Liberals. Twenty years ago, they claimed to be saving Indo-China from "Communism" (ie saving it for even nastier US puppets). Now that some Indo-

Chinese want to get away from that "Communism" and the legacy of poverty that the West has left them, the Liberals don't want to know them.

Another is the degree to which Labor has moved political debate



to the right. Four years ago, when Blainey was in full cry, the Liberals didn't dare go near him. In today's climate, Howard has no such qualms.

Indeed, Labor is doing covertly what Howard wants to do in the open. On June 1 it unilaterally cut the number of Indo-Chinese refugees, and raised the pass mark for the immigration points test, cutting out migrants whose trade qualifications are not "immediately recognisable" here (ie mostly Asians, Latin Americans and South Europeans). It made the cost of even *inquiring* about migration to Australia prohibitive for many Third World applicants.

Finally, there is the disgusting selfishness that dominates the debate. Howard, Hawke, the Fitzgerald Inquiry — all want more business and skilled migration as a quick fix for Australian bosses' past failure to invest or train workers, and never mind the drain on Third World countries. All want to cut refugee intakes, which is an area of real human need. Even Howard's critics in the Liberal Party worry mainly about the effect on votes or, like the Confederation of Australian Industry, on investment from Asia.

For socialists, however, human needs come first. When people uproot themselves because of oppression, war, poverty or family break-up, we say — let them in. A recent economic study found that even quadrupling Australia's migrant intake to 500,000 annually would have a negligible impact on standards of living. There is simply no excuse, apart from prejudice, for keeping people out.

**ONE** sidelight to the debate has been the citizenship question.

The Fitzgerald Inquiry suggested withholding social security benefits from the one million non-citizens eligible to take out citizenship. John Howard has flirted with the idea, while Hawke — perhaps sensitive to the fact that 60 percent of such people are British or Irish — is launching a citizenship drive instead.

But why should non-citizens have benefits withheld, or be pressured at all? They work, they pay taxes, they get ripped off by employers like the rest of us. Citizenship is little more than the right to vote for two near-identical parties, and to hold an Aussie passport. You earn it by no other skill than being born here, or living here for a few years. All it really denotes is "loyalty" to Australia — that is, to this patch of capitalist-owned earth rather than some other.

As Karl Marx so admirably put it, "The working class has no country". Citizenship is a worthless institution, and we should brook no discrimination against those who can't be bothered with it.

**A FURTHER** sidelight is the question of Japanese investment.

This is mainly vexing the middle class, according to some survey evidence. The *Bulletin* ran a nasty front page some time back showing a pair of chopsticks lifting out a piece of suburbia, and 1500 chauvinists met on the Gold Coast to protest about a Japanese "buy-up".

Even if such claims had substance, one is inclined to ask, "So what?" The right-wingers who are whingeing are the same ones who



tell us how wonderful competition is. They can hardly complain if Japan wins that competition (or are they only for competition that they win?)

The truth, though, is that Japanese investment is not so large.

In 1986-87 it was 17 percent of total foreign investment in Australia, ranking third behind the US and New Zealand. (Our racists never talk about the Kiwi menace!) It has almost certainly grown in 1987-88 but it is far from dominant.

A Queensland survey by consultants Richard Ellis found that only on the Gold Coast, and then only in the hotel industry is there significant Japanese ownership (16 percent of hotel-motel rooms, and 41 per cent of rooms in major hotels). Gold Coast offices and shops, Brisbane offices, shops, hotels and industrial sites — each category has only 1 to 6 percent Japanese investment. Some take-over!

The properties that Japanese investors buy are all available on the open market. Why don't Aussie investors buy them? Partly because they want quicker returns than tourist development offers ... and partly because, like Alan Bond in Chile, they're after bigger killings overseas.

**Capitalists are capitalists whatever their nationality, and our main exploiters remain the homegrown variety by far.**



Naturalisation ceremony: who cares if people don't bother with it?