

## EPISODE 3: THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM WAR

### Summary

Despite engendering widespread criticism overseas, in the 1950s under the Menzies government Australia's 'whites only' immigration policy seemed as popular as ever. Indeed, the rise of Communism in the region added extra justification to the perceived need to prevent Asians entering the country.

But as well as deploying soldiers in Korea and Vietnam, the Menzies government joined in a plan to defuse support for Communism in Australia. Ironically, in the long term, this would sow the seeds of the end of the White Australia Policy. The Colombo Plan allowed large numbers of Asian exchange students into the country.

John Menadue had never met any Asians before. When he arrived at Adelaide University he discovered he was to room with students from Malaysia. It changed his life. He saw, like many others, that Asians were not to be feared or despised; rather, Australia's overtly racially-based policies were.

Menadue joined the ALP Club when a new generation was becoming radicalised. He soon met and worked with the likes of Gough Whitlam and Don Dunstan and began agitating to end Labor's support for a white Australia.

These were the years when Menzies towered over the Australian political landscape and despite the young guard's efforts, change seemed far away.

Then, in the 1960s, an event embarrassed the government and exposed the racial basis for immigration policy. In 1965, five-year-old Fijian Indian Nancy Prasad faced deportation after her siblings tried to prevent her leaving. Leading Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins rallied to her cause and on the day of her deportation, in an incredibly bold act, staged her kidnap before the world's press.



The event drew massive attention to the case, but despite this Nancy was still deported. The stunt embarrassed the Menzies government, which was seen as increasingly out of step. Soon after Menzies retired, Harold Holt made token changes to admit small numbers of highly qualified Asians into Australia.

Finally, in 1973, the White Australia Policy was formally ended by the Whitlam government – or was it?

Despite burying the policy, Whitlam was in fact less than keen to permit thousands of Vietnamese war refugees into the country. Whitlam's private secretary at the time, John Menadue, and immigration official Wayne Gibbons recall the meagre response to Vietnamese refugees and Whitlam's concern that these refugees from Communism would not support a Labor government.

It was left to Whitlam's successor, Malcolm Fraser, to consign immigration restrictions on non-Europeans to history.

Even after the official end of the White Australia Policy it was not certain that large numbers of Asians would be accepted in Australia. Wayne Gibbons recalls that the Fraser government feared the arrival of the first Vietnamese boat in 1976 would cause public alarm, and ordered him to hush it up.

Ultimately, faced by a refugee crisis in

Asia, Fraser admitted large numbers of Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s. His decision allowed people like Phong Nguyen to find a new home after traumatic experiences on the boats.

John Menadue eventually became head of the Fraser government's immigration department. He worked to encourage Asian migration. In the years that followed, millions would migrate to Australia from almost every country on earth, making Australia among the most culturally diverse countries in the world.

Ironically, despite this, the public face of immigration policy would increasingly be dominated by how Australia would react to unplanned refugee arrivals, despite the fact these migrants currently make up 3 per cent of the total.

### Discussion and analysis

**3.1** How did a generational change of political leadership have an impact on Australia's immigration policies?

**3.2** How did the Colombo Plan influence changing attitudes?

**3.3** The Nancy Prasad case showed how publicity could be used to gain popular support for immigration. How does media publicity continue to challenge government immigration policies today?