

## FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

### Interview with Jerzy Zubrzycki

#### Questions by Paul Byrnes and Penelope McDonald

Q: Jerzy, I want to talk to you about Arthur Calwell and what you know of the origins of the policy of mass migration in 1945. It seems like an almost miraculous thing that he came up with this policy. How did he come up with this idea of the mass migration program and how did he get it through?

JZ: It was an amazing idea at the time. Australia went through a terrible time during the great economic decline in the 1930s. The memory of huge unemployment and misery and the absence of any security or assistance to people who were unemployed were all very fresh memories. We were still at war when Calwell rose in Parliament House on the second of August to make his famous announcement about immigration policy. If I remember rightly, it was about six or seven days before the atomic bomb fell in Hiroshima. So, we were still technically at war at the time. Yet, he had the courage and vision to make this statement with considerable support of his own Prime Minister, Chifley, and with every expectation that Menzies, the leader of the Opposition, would equally be welcoming of the scheme, which he was.

Q: What did he actually say in this speech that was so remarkable?

JZ: The speech began with the famous words that Australia has just been to the war. We were nearly invaded by the Japanese. That there was much at stake: to defend our country at all costs; to renew ourselves; and to rebuild our country that was so neglected, with its infrastructure badly needing repair. There was also the need for rethinking our aims in immigration: was it to be for the industrial purpose; was it to feed industry; or was it to follow the previous 1918–20 model of rural settlement, which had failed miserably? He opted firmly for immigration to be not the precondition of industrial development but the necessary ingredient of that process.

The immigration program that he unveiled was to be the first such overall program, not a series of measures as in the 30s, that served for immigration policy. Hardly that, it was to be a self-contained integrated policy at all levels, in terms of sources, settlement, services, and in terms of the actual destination of people coming here as immigrants. And then he began to talk about the numbers [of increase in population needed]. The number he gave was determined as a percentage of annual growth, at the rate of two percent. Half of that, one percent, would come from natural increase, excess of births over deaths, and the other half would be a net intake of immigrants. Those numbers, based on a population at the time of seven million, of 70,000 annual target were enormous for immigrants because, even during the war period, they never exceeded 40–50,000. Even then these were huge numbers. The numbers specified were overwhelming to people who were never used to this sort of thing. Equally overwhelming was the idea that this would be a national effort managed at all times by the government of the day with strong public support. Then he talked about sources of immigrants. Naturally, he paid special attention to the British Isles, our traditional sources. Almost in the same sentence, [he stated] that immigration targets would also be determined with likely intake from United States and dominion countries — we're still talking about dominions, not Commonwealth countries — and also with people who met the health criteria and through their ability for resettlement, could come from continental Europe. It was the very first official public statement that referred to non-British, non-traditional sources of immigration.

It was one of the greatest speeches ever delivered in the House of Representatives in Canberra. In the last part of that famous statement, he said we have to remember that those people settling in Australia will not be seen by the community at large as being alien, as being new, as being — I think the form of words he used was 'being a nuisance'. [They will be seen] as coming here to help our country to grow, to develop, to populate. Whatever happens to them, [he said] we have to blame ourselves for not making settlement easy and successful. This was Calwell's extraordinary statement that showed extraordinary political courage. Within the same hour, Menzies stood up and strongly welcomed this speech as an act of statesmanship and promised Opposition support. From then on [it] became bipartisan policy.

Q: Do you think that anyone at the time recognised how significant this day was, in terms of the direction the country was going to take?

JZ: I traced editorial articles in *The Melbourne Argus*, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and they were, all of them, equally prepared to endorse the policy as an act of statesmanship. 'We need people. We need them at all times and we must have them now.' In those editorials, there were very few references to the non-British and non-traditional sources as a likely scenario. But the beginning was made and there was very little response negating the principle. It's interesting that some of Calwell's close friends and correspondents such as Frank Clune, the writer, for example, were reasonably complimentary in their personal correspondence with Calwell, which I traced in the archives. They're not altogether overwhelmingly in favour of it. But these likely critics were almost silent at the time. And far more importantly, from the very beginning, Calwell, being a clever politician, organised the labour movement to support him through his personal influence in the Australian Council of Trade Unions. From then the ACTU was on his side. The ACTU was on the Immigration Advisory Council and the head of ACTU went to Europe in late 1945 with the first immigration mission. So labour, organised labour and the union movement, was firmly on his side.

Q: This, of course, wasn't always the case in the Labor Party before Calwell, was it? Can you say a little bit about the antagonism between Labor and migration policy?

JZ: For a long time before WWII and even during WWII, ALP was non-committal about migration. The idea of large numbers or even small numbers [of migrants] after the war was anathema to people who had just recovered from depression and unemployment. It's interesting that Calwell never raised the whole issue in the Labor caucus. I went through every single minute of successive ALP caucus meetings in Parliament House after Labor came to power under Curtin, and then under Chifley, and migration just doesn't feature in caucus meetings. It seems that Calwell ignored caucus with the purpose of assuring support in that particularly influential body within the Labor Party. He spoke to others in the community, the ACTU above all. He sought their support at all times but he did not seek a formal endorsement by members of parliament in the caucus endorsing a motion to that effect.

Q: How much opposition was there to a mass migration program before this policy was announced in a general sense in the country? And where was that opposition centred?

JZ: The opposition to Calwell's ideas of post-war migration as a possibility was present in the Labor Party. Melbourne, I think, was the centre of opposition, less so Sydney. It seems that traditional right-wing domination in the Sydney ALP was more prepared to talk about immigration. By and large [the opposition] was not something that would press the minister, embarrass the minister or even embarrass Calwell before he became Minister for Immigration.

Q: I was thinking in a wider sense, in terms of publications like *The Bulletin* and the history of fairly virulent opposition that had occurred in the 30s, the 20s and right back to the 1860s. Was there a general climate in Australia of fear and opposition to migration policies?

JZ: Migration from non-British sources, a migration of coloured people was of course on the agenda in the public debate from the very beginning of the twentieth century: from the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act, it being the first parliamentary measurement, in Melbourne in 1901. Opposition centred on that even before then, in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. *The Bulletin* was outspoken as its main medium. There were instances of other opposition but in those days, no one really questioned the need for immigration — assuming they were all people coming from the old country. People would always question, with very few significant exceptions, the need for challenging or changing the White Australia Policy. Calwell accepted that, and the form of words he used in his 1945 speech was quite, I think, cleverly chosen. I forget the actual wording of that particular clause in his speech but he said that people from Europe and continental Europe can come, subject to existing legislation and usual criteria. This was, of course, a veiled reference to White Australia Policy.

Q: It wasn't a policy of open doors and it wasn't a break with the White Australia Policy. Can you talk about Calwell's attitude to other races' inclusion in this new policy?

JZ: White Australia featured very prominently in Calwell's thinking about migration. His actions in not allowing coloured people to come to Australia, not allowing Asians who came as refugees during the war to stay in the country, a series of almost scandalous issues relating to wives of Australians who would normally be allowed to stay in the country, shows him to be a man who would never allow the slightest exception to the canon of the law. The White Australia Act 1901 for him was the bible. He never departed from that. To Calwell, the dictation tests and all the other ugly aspects of that policy were not to be touched. At the same time, as a private person, I'm told that he had close friends in the Chinese community in Melbourne. Someone told me that he spoke Cantonese. I was never able to verify this. When I interviewed him in Parliament House as a leader of the Opposition in the mid-60s, I should have asked him the question but I forgot.

Q: He is remembered as saying: 'two Wongs don't make a white'. Do you think that history has been kind or fair to Calwell?

JZ: No, that particular statement that 'no two Wongs make a white' was incorrectly transcribed from Calwell's parliamentary record by changing the uppercase 'White' to lower case. He was questioned in parliament by a Mr White, a Liberal Party member from Victoria or somewhere, asking about deportation of a Mr Wong who happened to be known personally to Calwell. Calwell jokingly said; 'oh, well, these two Wongs will never make a White', meaning the Mr White in parliament sitting across the room from him. But the press transcribed it as lowercase 'white' as if it was a metaphor for a white person and not 'Mr White'. Regrettably, this was not properly corrected until about 1983, when a Labor Party man, Cameron — a very prominent politician and minister in the first Hawke government — took the opportunity of some question in parliament to put on record the actual wording and spelling of the name White by Calwell.

Q: Do you think Calwell has been given his due as an Australian visionary or politician?

JZ: Not yet, no. I think this remains to be done.

Q: What do you think his place in Australian politics should be?

JZ: Having spent some two years or so going through Calwell's personal and parliamentary papers and correspondence in the National Library and then having spent equal amount of time in the Commonwealth archives, I have formed the view, and I put it in print, that he was a great visionary. Here was a politician of extraordinary courage, knowing full well that his own party would probably not support him if he went openly with those ideas. Calwell, a man of courage, in my judgement, will be seen by posterity as one of our greater statesmen. He gave us what we have now, a multicultural Australia. He gave us a country which in the space of the last 45 or 50 years has almost trebled its population. We have increased the proportion of non-English speaking background people by approximately six times. We have done it at a much greater rate and with a considerably greater proportion of non-English speaking people than United States or Canada, where the whole process took around six generations. In the space of two-and-a-half generations, we've become truly multicultural and truly international, where immigration has been a great success in terms of its economic, political and, above all, cultural potential. I think that is all due to Calwell's vision and political courage. I trust that will be recognised by historians in the future. It was not recognised at the time when he made those statements.

Q: The irony is that, all of that being true, it wasn't what he intended. His vision of Australia was an Australia of twenty million white people. I'd like to talk about the way the policy changed and whether he foresaw where it might go. Did he have a vision of what might happen with this policy?

JZ: Calwell had a vision of a social experiment, a just society and social state. He referred obliquely to papal encyclicals on the topic, and subsequent statements by Pope Pius XII and his successor. However, Calwell's idea of Australia as 20 million strong was not one that would include an ever-increasing proportion of coloured people, as is our experience right now. To him this would be anathema. What actually happened went way beyond his initial thinking and his vision. But, without the success of the first five or six years under his custodianship, we would never have been able to extend the vision by his political successors to embrace coloured people and a significant and ever-increasing proportion of Asians in our community. Calwell laid the foundation for what we have now.

Q: He was also a very wily politician in that he foresaw the need for a complete change of public attitude to immigration. Could you talk a little bit about the things that he attempted to do to change people's minds about this program?

JZ: When I talk about Calwell's attitudes to the implementation of his vision, as a minister in particular, we must not ignore the fact that he was also the Minister for Information. This was his other portfolio, held jointly with Immigration. He used his information portfolio very skilfully to present, to put it very crudely, a kind of propaganda screen for what was going on in his own department and overseas in the actual recruitment. Hence, there was an attempt to ensure that the very first wave of arrivals of displaced persons were people who were blonde and, miraculously, some spoke English; that they were being photographed and seen; that the minister was always welcoming them on arrival in Melbourne or Sydney. These were attempts to promote immigration as a national enterprise through information, propaganda if you like.

Q: I sense that he was alone in how quickly he foresaw the possibility of the way film could be used as a publicity tool in the days before television. Do you think he was a politician ahead of his time in respect of his communication skills?

JZ: In examining Calwell's personal and parliamentary papers, I formed an impression that Calwell was very quick to come to grips with the way a newsreel, screened in Australian cinemas before the main feature film, could be used to inform people about immigration. Instances of successful immigration, blond-looking people to begin with, doing things, learning English, dancing in their national costumes and those sort of things could be shown for the benefit of those who went to cinema and inevitably saw that newsreel. The ability to use snatches of information thanks to cinema, at a time when there was no television and not many people even had a radio, was very useful and productive.

Q: Was there much change once the Labor Party was voted out in 1949? What was the effect of that on immigration policy?

JZ: The change of government in 1949, when Calwell ceased to be Minister for Immigration, did not effect immigration as a national enterprise. His successor in the portfolio, Harold Holt, was very friendly with Calwell. Outside parliament, Menzies and Calwell were on a very friendly basis socially so there was no immediate adverse impact on immigration as an enterprise. Things were already in train and immigration under the leadership of Tas Heyes, a first-rate public servant and a visionary too, was doing extremely well. They were recruiting people and promoting training schemes for people recruited, because most men at the time were former servicemen. Sending them to Europe worked well and produced a very good outcome on the whole. So immigration as an enterprise was already well launched and the change of government made very little impact on it.

Q: We want to go back and talk about the public campaign. What I need to establish was why did they think they needed a public education campaign? What was the climate and who thought there was a need?

JZ: The need for a large-scale educational campaign in the community at large to promote the idea of immigration, particularly the idea of what they then called alien immigration, meaning non-British, non-English speaking people, was already recognised in 1943. The person who first put it on record in the government was HC 'Nugget' Coombs, as the prominent head of one of the key departments of state. Whatever happened after that clearly followed this particular warning given by Coombs and endorsed by Calwell that there must be large-scale immigration educational campaigning in the community.

Q: And why did they think that was needed?

JZ: The *raison d'être* for this particular policy recommendation was the experience in Australia of people who had come to Australia on various earlier schemes, speaking not a word of English or looking different from most of us or observing different customs. Naturally there had to follow a campaign which was already thought through within the Department of Post-War Reconstruction and implemented in parallel fashion by the Department of Immigration once it got going.

Q: Was there a sense that Australians were not ready for a large-scale influx and why?

JZ: The educational campaign in the community clearly recognised and reflected the impression that Australians were not ready to embrace people of other nationalities, languages and races. They had to be prepared for that. This resulted in a very clever use of the press, the media, newsreels and feature films by Calwell and then by his successors after the change of government in 1949.

Q: Calwell promised that for every one non-British migrant, there would be ten British migrants come to Australia. Do you think he ever believed that was possible? And if not, why did he say it?

JZ: When Calwell made his historic speech in parliament in 1945, he put in it a formula for planning purposes which simply read that for every non-British migrant, meaning peoples largely from Europe in terms of his own wording, there would be ten British migrants. That, I judge, was simply a ploy to put aside any likely criticism of his immigration policy. The very size of that policy, seventy thousand [migrants] a year initially and many more after that, would be an anathema to most Australians at the time, who were used to much smaller numbers [of migrants]. To visualise large numbers of non-English speaking people coming would not be acceptable. History tells us what happened in the next few years. By 1948, at the time Calwell was about to give up his place as minister before the change of government, we already have a large proportion of non-English speaking [migrants]. The proportion [of 1:10] was almost reversed between 1949 and 1951. Overwhelmingly, people of non-English speaking backgrounds were beginning to come into the country. This was partly as a result of Calwell having, 'discovered' in Europe a large reservoir of people who were in displaced persons' camps, who could be selected and recruited for the purpose of migration. Even before that, his initial reconnaissance of Europe indicated to him that the likelihood of British people coming was quite minimal. Indeed, Forsyth, one of his advisers and the author of the famous book *The Myth of Open Spaces*, warned that there would be very few British migrants able to come to Australia after the war because of pre-existing shortages of labour in British industry at the outbreak of WWII. And that's exactly what happened.

Q: Is it true that Calwell never believed that target was possible?

JZ: The ostensible public formula of one to ten, as unveiled in Calwell's speech of 1945, he could not possibly have believed as a realistic target. He knew very well from existing studies of British manpower that Britain would be very short of labour after WWII, and therefore, very short of likely emigrants to Australia after 1945. This was proved for him by one of his closest advisers, WD Forsyth, author of *The Myth of Open Spaces*. Forsythe was an economist who was seconded from university to the Department of Foreign Affairs [then External Affairs] to provide advice on this very topic because his own studies of European manpower potential from East to West, including Britain, on the eve of WWII, indicated two things: a likely shortage of manpower in Britain because of the declining birth rate, and the large reservoir of manpower in Central and Eastern Europe. Calwell knew that. True to himself, he would probably have admitted that it was not a realistic statement because it [would] never happen that way. History, of course, proved this was the case.