Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis explains the development of the White Australia policy in a new way, not as the result of working-class racism or working-class mobilisation, but as a ruling-class attempt to secure three major objectives—Anglo-Australian colonisation of the continent, a modern rather than indentured labour economy, across the whole continent, and an “homogeneous” population. These strategies were fought for by the dominant elements within the ruling class in a series of conflicts from 1876 onwards, with the first White Australia policy being established by 1888 through legislation that effectively prevented Chinese immigration and severely constrained the employment of indentured non-European labour in Queensland. The laws adopted in 1901, shortly after federation, represented a broadening and consolidation of the principles established in 1888.

White Australia was one of the defining elements of Australian nationalism and a central feature of Australian politics for two-thirds of the twentieth century. Frank Castles and Paul Kelly have argued that in the period around federation, Australia’s first national politicians developed an “Australian settlement”, a set
of broad policies agreed to by all major parties, policies above the fray of partisan conflict, which guided the year-by-year business of legislating and governing. They see White Australia as a crucial part of this “Australian settlement”. Nevertheless it was dismantled in a long process beginning in the late 1950s and ending in 1975 with the passing of the Racial Discrimination Act. The ideology of “White Australia” and the prevention of non-European immigration were always affronts to the peoples of Asia, and with decolonisation after the Second World War, the affronts were felt by the political leaders and business people who were now running Australia’s neighbours. With racism more generally discredited after the Holocaust, the White Australia policy had become a strategic, ideological and economic liability.

Yet even years after its official demise, White Australia and its attendant racism have continued to haunt Australian politics. During 1984-85, Geoffrey Blainey won a national audience for his campaign against the supposed “surrendering” of Australia to Asia through immigration. In August 1988, Liberal opposition


leader, John Howard, called for reduced Asian immigration in a vain attempt to win votes. Pauline Hanson’s election to federal parliament in 1996 unleashed racist campaigns against both Indigenous people and non-European immigrants that were openly tolerated, if not encouraged, by Howard as Prime Minister. Since 1999, John Howard has used the issues of refugees and terrorism to promote fear of Arab and Muslim people. Many writers see contemporary Australian politics as a legacy of White Australia, including Ghassan Hage, and the distinguished contributors to *Legacies of White Australia* published in 2003. Ien Ang argued that the rise of Hanson was “a sharp reminder that the structures of feeling of White Australia have not disappeared.” From the right there is a renewed willingness to defend the White Australia policy as “a rational, and in a number of ways progressive, product of its times.” For those of us who wish to permanently rid society of racism, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of its origins and underpinnings. This thesis will argue that the currently hegemonic explanation of White Australia is fundamentally flawed, and of limited assistance in understanding racism in Australia, either in the past, or today.

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A review of the literature

For all its importance, the White Australia policy has been relatively little studied; and the dynamics leading to its adoption have been least studied of all. Until 1974, there was only one substantial history of the campaign to exclude non-white immigrants: Myra Willard’s *The history of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, first published in 1923. The early 1970s saw a transformation in the approach of historians, most of whom for the first time saw White Australia as a question of racism, and began investigating the nature and history of that racism. For the first time, too, the experiences of Chinese and other non-European people in Australia, and their contact with Anglo-Australian people,

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7 Myra Willard, *The history of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton (Vic), 1967 (first pub 1923). RJ Lewis makes a similar comment regarding Victoria for the years 1880-1907, “the period which saw the greatest involvement in Victoria’s history of Governments in passing or attempting to pass measures which were specifically designed to restrict non-Europeans. And yet it had been little studied.” From ““Strangers within the gates’: Victorian governments and non-Europeans”, 1880-1908, MA Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1982, p. ii. I am aware of nothing since which fills the gap identified by Lewis.

began to be studied, and that has continued to develop.\(^9\) However, after a burst of interest in the 1970s, research into the reasons for anti-Asian racism stalled, in sharp contrast to the intense focus on contact between Aboriginal people and European settlers that has developed over the past two decades into a major discipline in its own right. Indeed, in 1982, Eric Andrews wrote that, “Further work on the general picture [of White Australia] is not needed”.\(^10\)

A major reason for this complacency was the dominance of a mythology of White Australia, in which large scale Chinese immigration during the gold rushes had alerted working class people to see Chinese people as a danger; and even if the riotous methods they used were unfortunate, all classes became more and more agreed that the white working class had to be protected from Asian immigration. In the labourist version of this myth, White Australia was seen as the product of a class struggle between pastoralists and sugar planters, who wanted to exploit “cheap coloured labour”, and the working people who fought to stop them. Thus it is the working class (however defined) that imposed the policy against exploitative employers. This mythology still dominates popular views of the White Australia policy, as can be seen in the Sydney Daily Mirror, which in 1994 headlined an historical feature on the


Clunes riot of 1873: “White Australia Policy sprang from workers’ uprising”.\(^{11}\) In the lead-up to the 1996 federal election, Opposition leader, John Howard, told one audience that, “it was the Coalition which finally put an end to Labor’s White Australia policy.”\(^{12}\) Fuelling this myth was the insistence of the Labor Party over decades that it was the only reliable custodian of the White Australia policy; in the words of Labor leader, James Scullin, “Labour is solid for a White Australia, and no amount of political propaganda will shake the people’s faith in our party on that big national question.”\(^{13}\)

The four major works which have attempted to explain White Australia were written by Myra Willard (1923), Charles Price (1974), Robert A Huttenback (1976) and Andrew Markus (1979). Willard’s was the pioneering history, regarded as sufficiently authoritative that there was no new book-length account for over half a century. She proposed two dynamics which led to the adoption of White Australia: the resistance of the working class to competition with non-European labour; and the desire to preserve “a British-Australian

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\(^{11}\) *Daily Mirror* (Sydney), 30 September 1994.

\(^{12}\) ‘Politics and patriotism: A reflection on the national identity debate’, speech given by Hon John Howard, Melbourne, 13 December 1995, [online] [http://www.ozpolitics.info/election2004/1995-ident.htm](http://www.ozpolitics.info/election2004/1995-ident.htm) [accessed 1 December 2006]. He was, of course, wrong on both counts. The *Immigration Restriction Act of 1901* was a central plank in the 1901 election campaign of the quasi-Protectionist government of Edmund Barton as well as the Labor campaigns in various states, and the legislation was written and introduced by the Liberal, Alfred Deakin. The principle was overwhelmingly supported by the Free Trade party led by George Reid, as well as by Labor, with the parliamentary debate revolving around the form which exclusion would take, rather than the principle of exclusion itself. Similarly, while coalition governments began the formal unravelling of the policy, it was only completed under the Whitlam government from 1973-75. On this see Gwenda Tavan, *The long, slow death of White Australia*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2005.

nationality” throughout the continent.14 These two themes have dominated the historiography of White Australia, with this qualification—that since the 1970s, the second has been reconceptualised as “racism”, and occasionally imperialism. Where there has been debate, it has been, for instance, over whether or not the motives of the colonial working class were “economic” or “racial”.15

In the hands of some writers, the central myth was qualified to acknowledge the role played by middle class elements. Ray Markey described the various anti-Chinese campaigns from the gold rushes through to the end of the nineteenth century as attracting “a populist alliance of diggers, city artisans, small businessmen and bourgeois liberals”.16 Ann Curthoys too embraced the idea that, “What emerged during the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s, then, was an alliance among the political organisations of the working class, the self-employed, and the small employers.”17 But in even the most subtle accounts, it was the motives of the working class, and the labour movement’s role in the campaigns, that were described, analysed and highlighted, while those politicians who led the campaigns were generally described in terms of the demography of their electorates (mostly working class), rather than their own class positions or interests.18 The mythology is also sustained by partial truths

14 Willard, p. 189.
15 See Verity Burgmann, “Capital and labour” in Curthoys and Markus (eds), Who are our enemies? pp. 20-34, for the outlines of this debate.
18 For example, Curthoys, Race and ethnicity, p. 443, where she describes seven NSW MPs involved in the anti-Chinese campaign of 1878 as “a group of M.L.A.’s, usually representing working class electorates”. Of the seven, John Davies was a former Cabinet minister and the
that are deceptive in the impression they create. For instance, in his discussion of refugee policy in Australia, Don McMaster wrote, “Trade unions were major supporters of the White Australia policy, perceiving immigrant labour, and especially Chinese labour, as a threat to working conditions.”\(^{19}\) He neglected to say that most politicians, squatters, religious leaders, newspapers, schoolteachers and businesspeople large and small, were also major supporters of the White Australia policy.

The problem is that the historical consensus is unconvincing to anyone who cares to look critically at the explanations on offer. The writer most hostile to the established mythology, Verity Burgmann, argued that, “It attributes to the working class a degree of power and influence that is quite unrealistic.”\(^{20}\) Legislation to restrict Chinese immigration was passed by the Queensland parliament in 1877 when there was little ongoing labour movement in that colony. While individual strikes could be won, and governments pressed to give relief to the unemployed at times, no labour movement in any colony had the capacity to exert sustained class pressure before the 1890s, and certainly not pressure on the scale needed to impose a long-term immigration policy on the state. The most powerful working class mobilisation in Australia before 1890 was the seamen’s strike of 1878-79, centred in New South Wales, which saw

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20 Burgmann, *Capital and labour*, p. 33.
thousands of workers take prolonged industrial action to prevent the
Australasian Steam Navigation Company from replacing European seafarers
with Chinese. This industrial action was supported by a vast cross-class popular
movement that defeated and ultimately ruined the largest business in Sydney.
Yet *this* movement could not force the New South Wales parliament to pass a
law to restrict Chinese immigration, similar to Queensland’s.\(^{21}\)

One of the very few other writers to have subjected the existing explanations to
sustained scrutiny is Robert J Lewis, in his MA thesis, “‘Strangers within the
gates’: Victorian governments and non-Europeans, 1880-1908”.\(^{22}\) Lewis was
frustrated by the Australia-wide approach taken by Willard, arguing that “in
covering the situation of all the colonies, Willard may end up not sufficiently
explaining them individually.” After listing the factors which Willard believed
led to anti-Chinese legislation in New South Wales, Victoria and South
Australia in 1881, Lewis asked:

> Were Victorians more affected by competition, the Queensland situation,
or the introduction of diseases? Were all colonies equally concerned with
all factors? Willard does not say, relying on such expressions as: “the
now fairly general desire for the restriction of Chinese immigration
found united expression”…\(^{23}\)

He found that Victoria rarely featured in Willard’s account, and so its anti-
Chinese legislation was essentially unexplained. He found Charles Price’s 1974
account similarly frustrating; the closest it came to explaining the 1888 anti-

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\(^{21}\) The attempt by Premier Sir Henry Parkes to pass a Chinese immigration bill was defeated less
than four months after the end of the strike, *SMH* 23 April 1879, p. 2, col. 6 and p. 3, col. 1.

\(^{22}\) University of Melbourne, 1982.

\(^{23}\) Lewis, Strangers, p. iii.
Chinese laws in Victoria was in arguing the strength of public opinion. Lewis commented:

It may well be that this explanation is correct, but it would need to be explored and justified much more. Did “public opinion” simply reflect politicians’ attitudes, or did it influence them? Did it result in politicians being forced into introducing laws they really did not want? Or did it just influence the timing of the measures? Is there any correlation between popular demands and actual legislative details? Were politicians succumbing to electoral pressure to safeguard their seats?24

Neither did Lewis find any satisfaction in the work of Andrew Markus or Geoffrey Oddie,25 observing that neither offered any explanation for the 1881 legislation; and that they argued that the 1888 legislation could have been the result of union campaigning. But there was a gap: the mobilisation of 1887-8 ended around May 1888, but “the legislation itself was not passed until six months later”, a problem which Markus recognised but did not resolve.26

One reason for this lack of any convincing explanation lies in the methodology of Willard, Price, Huttenback and Markus, who painted a picture of society-wide antagonism to Chinese (or other non-European immigration), and then charted the legislative debates and consequences. What were missing were causal linkages. Myra Willard’s method was to focus on situations of conflict, when Anglo-Europeans campaigned or rioted against the Chinese. This seemed to Willard to prove that the presence of Chinese people was a problem, that

24 Lewis, Strangers, pp. iv-v.
26 Lewis, Strangers, pp. vi-viii.
Europeans and Chinese could never mix, and that the Chinese threatened the standard of living of the working class. These campaigns supposedly aroused the antipathy of the vast majority, and colonial governments supposedly succumbed, eventually, to popular pressure and passed more and more restrictive legislation against the Chinese. But why should they succumb, unless they agreed with restriction? And if they agreed with restriction, why?

In Willard, the working class had immediate, economic interests and expressed them in opposition to the Chinese, while the squatters and sugar planters (and the directors of the Australasian Steam Navigation Company in 1878) sought cheap, indentured labour. But the leading politicians and most of “the people” were above all this sectionalism, thinking only of what was best for the nation and all classes.

Though the leaders of the people admitted the cogency of the industrial reason for the exclusion of Asiatics of the coolie classes, one and all, including the leaders of this [Labor] party, believed that the higher social and political grounds for their policy were more conclusive than those of labour.27

What we have here is the development of a nationalist mythology, not an explanation of White Australia. The possibility that these “statesmen” might have been pursuing class agendas of their own is not even considered.

By the early 1950s, this self-congratulatory history no longer fitted, at least for some historians. The White Australia policy was being challenged from within

27 Willard, p. 203.
the policymaking establishment on liberal and foreign policy grounds. Diplomats, businesspeople and travellers found it was insulting to the newly independent nations of Asia who were our neighbours and that some of its rhetoric sounded uncomfortably close to that of the recently defeated Nazis. The racism of the policy had to be dealt with, and thus began a fitful debate over whether the working class was racist in mobilizing against Chinese people, or simply pursuing economic protection.28

The early 1970s represented a turning point in the historiography of the White Australia policy. For the first time, substantial historical works were published that saw racism as the policy’s defining feature, and set out to document, analyse, explain and historicise that racism. The first, and most cathartic work was Humphrey McQueen’s *A new Britannia*. McQueen’s project was much broader than racism; he was inquiring into the nature and social roots of radicalism and nationalism, with the aim of debunking the Old Left’s historical...

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28 This debate began in the mid-1950s, when *Australian Quarterly* magazine sponsored a debate consisting of four short articles by academic historians about the origins of White Australia. Bruce Mansfield was primarily concerned to argue that the White Australia policy was racist—a radically new position for an academic to take—and not a cover for some other political project, such as defending working class conditions. This led him to explicitly endorse Willard’s conclusion that the main impetus for White Australia was the desire to preserve a British-Australian nationality; “The origins of ‘White Australia’”, *Australian Quarterly*, December 1954, pp. 61-68. Mansfield’s analysis was contested by KM Dallas, who stridently argued that behind White Australia lay “opposition in shearing shed, mine and sawmill to the infiltration of scab labour in any form. The commonest form then, except in the canefields, was that of Chinese labour”; “The origins of ‘White Australia’”, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1, March 1955, pp. 43-52 (quote p. 43). Racism was thus largely irrelevant. Bede Nairn’s contribution echoed that of Dallas; while conceding that a “parasitical racialism” adhered to the policy, “The economic factor was of infinitely greater importance in the development of the White Australia Policy than either the racial or political.” However a rising sense of nationalism was also crucial; “A survey of the history of the White Australia Policy in the 19th century”, *Australian Quarterly*, Sept 1956, pp. 16-31 (quotes, pp. 26, 28). Thus the lines of debate, between an explanation of White Australia as a product of racism, versus a product of economic self-interest and working class self defence, were outlined.
mythology of radical labourism in general, and Russel Ward’s eulogy of the independent, radical bush worker in particular. McQueen’s book was important because it exposed the virulence of anti-Asian racism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the racism inherent in Australian nationalism, the degree to which racism was central to much early Labor politics, and the way that anti-Asian racism translated into pro-Empire militarism after the turn of the century. McQueen thus located Australian racism in “the chauvinism of British imperialism,” seeing it as “inherent in Australia’s economic and geographic position as the advance guard of European conquest” and “intensified by its geographic proximity to Asia.”

But having made the essential conceptual leap to imperialism and colonialism, McQueen turned back to relocate his case within a century of left nationalist mythologising. Despite the centrality of British imperialism for McQueen, the “tribunes of racism in Australia” were not its local representatives—the Governors, naval and military officers, trading and pastoral capitalists, cabinet ministers, imperial visitors, official priests, Orange Lodge officials, or newspaper editors—but “the leaders of the Labor Party.”

McQueen was followed in 1971 by FS Stevens, who edited a three volume collection of articles on aspects of Australian racism. For some pioneer

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29 McQueen, A new Britannia, pp. 21, 42.
30 McQueen, A new Britannia, esp. pp. 21, 50.
researchers into Australian racism, Stevens’ collection was pathbreaking,\textsuperscript{32} but only a handful of articles in the three volumes addressed the history of the White Australia policy and its attendant anti-Asian racism, and there were few original insights on this issue.

Kathryn Cronin produced two state-based accounts of anti-Chinese racism that were rich in descriptive content. She first contributed a long section on hostility to the Chinese in Queensland to \textit{Race Relations in Colonial Queensland}, which she co-wrote in 1975 with Raymond Evans and Kay Saunders.\textsuperscript{33} This used extensive archival sources and local newspapers to describe the racism faced by Chinese labourers and gold miners outside the context of major campaigns and crises. It included a brief but illuminating account of Chinese rural labour; from its introduction by planters in 1850s to the extensive Chinese agriculture in the north in the 1880s and 1890s, which was eventually wiped out by government action. Cronin pointed to the use of fear of disease, especially leprosy, to whip up fear of Chinese people, and the way wildly inaccurate and terrifying information about the disease was deliberately promoted. Her account of the

\textsuperscript{32} In the Preface to the 1988 edition of \textit{Race Relations in Colonial Queensland}, Ray Evans and Kay Saunders wrote of their reaction to the publication of Stevens’ three volumes. They had felt dissatisfied with the existing histories of white-black and Anglo-Asian contact: “There was little in any of these works directly confronting the historical problem of white racism in Australia. That is why, as researchers working upon white interactions with Aborigines, Melanesians and Chinese in Queensland, we were greatly stimulated by the seemingly iconoclastic appearance, in 1972, of a three volume set of studies, boldly titled Racism: The Australian Experience, edited by economic historian, Frank Stevens. These books seemed to herald a long overdue penetration of the Anglo-Australian psyche, in search of the hidden roots of ‘race prejudice’. As a reading experience, Racism was thus cathartic in terms of what it frankly raised for public disclosure rather than what it ultimately deciphered. It fired a scatter-gun of disturbing articles into a formerly quiet public place and, to our ears, it carried the report of a starter’s pistol.” pp. xi-xii

\textsuperscript{33} Kathryn Cronin, “‘The yellow agony’: Racial attitudes and responses towards the Chinese in colonial Queensland” in Evans, Saunders, Cronin, \textit{Race relations in colonial Queensland: A history of exclusion, exploitation and extermination}, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, pp. 235-340. \textit{Race Relations} was first published in 1975 as \textit{Exclusion, exploitation, and extermination}. 
Queensland gold rush is fascinating, and she uses a few “case studies” to really good effect; for example describing the development of the race issue in Cooktown, where local opinion was initially divided, but then shifted as the number of Chinese rose rapidly and racist agitators created fear.

The most significant weakness in Cronin’s account was her tendency to quote indiscriminately and juxtaposes comments made at very different times from the 1860s through to the late 1890s and beyond, without hinting that there might have been some shift in social or political conditions or underlying assumptions over that period.\(^{34}\) Equally, there was too often a lack of consideration about who was making a statement—the mere existence of a racist comment was enough to have it recorded.\(^{35}\) The result was that when dealing with the urban movement, she saw similarities in the racism of the pastoralists, the agitators, the workers and the middle class, but did not even discuss the possibility that there might be differences in their approach to people of different origins.

\(^{34}\) For example, her discussion of racial attitudes towards the Chinese jumps from comments made in 1876, to comments made in 1855, then 1881, 1877-78, 1881, 1899, and 1866, all within a page, pp. 242-3. The material used for subsequent pages is just as chronologically jumbled.

\(^{35}\) For example, Cronin reports that “European labourers continued to argue against the morality of the capitalist who wanted to hire aliens…”, Yellow agony, p. 262, but the source for this is a letter by the Senior Sargeant at Stanthorpe to the Commissioner of Police. As sources for her discussion of the attitudes of miners towards Chinese people, on p. 259, she has used G Carrington, *Colonial Adventures and Experiences*, London, 1871, p. 181; *Cooktown Courier*, 20 June 1874; G.R. Fitz-Roy Cole, “John Chinaman Abroad”, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 98, 1878, p. 450; *QPD., XXIII*, 13 June 1877, p. 235; CA Feilberg, “Can the Chinaman be Made a Good Colonist?”, *Victorian Review*, I, p. 367; see Yellow agony, Footnotes 229-233, pp. 325-6. All these are ruling class figures; with the parliamentarian quoted being Francis Ivory, one of Queensland’s richest squatters, who voted in the minority against anti-Chinese legislation. Only the editors of the *Cooktown Courier* would have had some relationship with North Queensland miners. Two pages later, p. 260, Cronin makes the same assertion: “The whites derived many of their attitudes concerning the Chinese from actual contact with them, for they were often camped cheek by jowl on the goldfields.” Her source for this is Mr. Kelsey, *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, IX, 1877-78, 63.
Cronin attempted to fit much of the racism she found into an analysis that, “The contact experiences of these years were to influence greatly the kind of stereotypes popularly applied to the Chinese and the northern Aborigines by European miners.” The argument that racism is a product of contact was also central to the writing of Andrew Markus, and Verity Burgmann has condemned this approach as blaming the victims of racism for the racism they suffered. This argument is also one of the dominant approaches within the sociology of racism, and is discussed theoretically in Chapter 2. The important point here is that Cronin was unable to substantiate her contact thesis, leaving an enormous explanatory gap in her work. One of the major themes in her chapters was the central role played by racist theories emanating from Britain and Europe and fears, whipped up by the press, that Chinese immigration was “part of a military design to conquer the North”, and that a struggle for survival was imminent. She then declared it “more accurate to assume that these notions of racial conflict were derived more from the whites’ immediate experiences in the frontier situation of the North”. There was no way that fear of a “Chinese invasion” was simply the product of someone’s experience, least of all that of the editors of Brisbane newspapers such as The Queenslander, nearly 2000km away from the “experience” of Chinese immigration into the north. Cronin failed to ask the obvious question: when British miners met Chinese people, were their responses and attitudes to people they had not met before in any way shaped by the pervasive and militant newspaper racism of the time? And did this media racism in any way shape the way they experienced and

36 Cronin, Yellow agony, p. 258
37 Verity Burgmann, “Writing racism out of history”, Arena [first series], no. 67, 1984, p. 84.
38 Cronin, Yellow agony, pp. 256-7
39 In a footnote she reports the Melbourne Argus claiming that the outcry against the Chinese was “far greater” in Brisbane than the north; note 285 on p. 327.
theorised that contact? Within half a page of describing some invasion propaganda, Cronin described “occasions when Chinese and Europeans travelled or worked together, for mutual protection against native raids”\(^{40}\) and elsewhere noted European miners and storekeepers defending Chinese people oppressed by police or mining wardens,\(^{41}\) and white miners facing scurvy when Chinese gardeners were driven out of their towns.\(^{42}\) The result was an analytical mess.

Cronin also wrote a major account of the Chinese in early Victoria,\(^{43}\) which focused on the gold rushes, and the earlier period during which many Chinese were brought in to do agricultural labour. She dealt with the violence and racism they faced in detail, documented it as widespread, and showed that the pastoralists were just as racist as the anti-Chinese campaigners. She went on to look at racial ideology, official responses, church missionary activity, and briefly at what happened after this period. For her, the legacy of the frontier (ie gold) experience was long lasting and profound. Colonial Casualties drew on a wide range of archival sources to show that hostility and violence towards Chinese people on the gold fields was sustained, and effectively rewarded by the government. Cronin provided a far richer and more credible account than earlier writers, and debunked a series of myths. However, she also asserted that the campaign against the Chinese continued into the 1860s and 70s, the period during which most discriminatory legislation was repealed, without any recognition that such a campaign might have been less violent and more

\(^{40}\) Cronin, Yellow agony, p. 257
\(^{41}\) Cronin, Yellow agony, pp. 274-5
\(^{42}\) Cronin, Yellow agony, p. 287.
intermittent. Her weakness once again was that she seemed content to describe responses to Chinese immigration, and to describe the racism directed towards them, rather than explain it or investigate its dynamic and possible class or political agendas behind it. As with her long discussion of the Chinese in Queensland, she indiscriminately mixed quotes from 1850s and 1880s with no sense that things might have changed. In particular, she made no attempt to analyse the role of the press or politicians in the anti-Chinese agitation, although she quoted liberally from them. Ruling class racism is frequently described in her two accounts, but neither identified as such, nor theorised.

Like Cronin, Robert A Huttenback set out to locate the racial exclusionism of the settlement colonies of the British empire in “the xenophobia and race hatred of the Anglo-Saxon”, along with “the workingman’s fear of losing his job to ‘cheap’ labour from Africa and Asia.”\(^44\) Written primarily from Colonial Office records, Huttenback’s book was both a description of the racist beliefs and arguments of British colonists, and a narrative of discriminatory and exclusionary legislation. While useful at this level, it offered little by way of analysis. Huttenback saw two principles on a collision course in the empire—the principle of “the natural equality of mankind at large”, and the determination of British settlers that their colonies would be a “White Man’s Country.”\(^45\) At no point do we find out why one principle triumphed over the other; racist exclusion triumphs as a result of the triumph of racism. Neither is there any serious justification for his argument that, “Race hatred was the driving force behind legislation”. What does become clear is that for all its

\(^{44}\) Huttenback, Racism and empire; see pp. 58, 323, for succinct statements of his thesis.

\(^{45}\) Huttenback, Racism and empire, p. 21.
professed attachment to equality, the Colonial Office was so weak in insisting on this principle that Huttenback concluded that its officials shared the racism of their colonial subjects.

In a recent article on the historiography of White Australia, Matthew Jordan has challenged historians who essentialise Australian racism, such as Raymond Evans, for whom “the idea of a white Australia was born…in the protracted process of Aboriginal dispossession, degradation and demise.” Jordan argues that this approach

runs the risk of imposing a set of ideas which only came to dominate in the late nineteenth century on a period when notions of race and blood had to compete with, and were for the most part subordinate to, notions of civil liberalism.46

He points to ambivalence towards race through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and the argument from Henry Reynolds and Andrew Markus that “colonial attitudes to race underwent a fundamental shift sometime during the 1870s and 1880s.”47 Ann Curthoys, too, has pointed out that both the advocates of the super-exploitation of unfree labour, and those for the exclusion of “coloured” labourers, were racist.48 Racism cannot explain the outcome of a struggle in which two of the major protagonists were racist.

47 Jordan, p. 11.
Andrew Markus and Charles Price attempted to use comparative history to understand White Australia, by looking at anti-Asian attitudes in Australasia and the Americas, and attempting to draw comparisons. Like Price and Willard, Andrew Markus’ *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia & California 1850-1901*, published in 1979, is an account of the most successful campaigns and crisis points in the campaign for a white Australia. Markus argued that the “near consensus” for racial exclusion, achieved by the end of the nineteenth century, was a product of “the experience of Chinese immigration”. In other words, it was contact between different peoples that gave rise to hatred and a desire for exclusion. Nowhere did he make a plausible case to support this theory; his “proof” was constructed from suggestion and implication. Despite his methodological emphasis on “direct experience”, he described very few experiences of contact between Chinese and European people — indeed, at one point he argued that, “After the gold rushes, agitation in urban areas arose not from the experience of a competitive system but from fear that one would come into being.” Why should ordinary people fear a system of competition unless the dominant discourses of the time — shaped overwhelmingly by newspapers — attempted to convince them that this was a future danger? Those experiences of contact Markus did discuss were experiences of conflict, and his sources for these were overwhelmingly newspapers, and the reports of mining wardens on gold fields.

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49 Markus, Fear and hatred, pp. xx-xxi. It should be noted that he does not mean the Chinese experience of immigration, nor the experience of the receiving population (which of course included people from many backgrounds, including some Chinese), but his imputation of the experience of British-Australians.

50 Markus, Fear and hatred, p. 249.
In fact, Markus’s own evidence tended to undermine his implicit argument. The anti-Chinese movement he described was occasionally massive and explosive, such as during the seamen’s strike of 1878-79; but most often it was small, isolated, sometimes dominated by trade unions with limited organisation and resources, unable to raise more than token amounts of money, with little real influence over politicians. Such a discrepancy ought to have led him to question his own emphasis, to look beyond the trade union campaigns to explain anti-Chinese legislation. While Markus discussed “experiences” which generated conflict, he ignored a range of other, relevant experiences, such as the experience of reading newspapers, day after day, permeated by the racism of the British empire, with episodic dishonest “exposés” of Chinese communities; the experience of being harangued by anti-Chinese ideologues; and the experience of economic insecurity. His discussion of “experience” was always focused on the experience of miners competing to find gold, or working class competition for jobs, a limitation which corrupted the validity of his argument. Nowhere did he discuss the middle-class experience of competition, as felt by the shopkeepers and publicans who were often the leaders of anti-Chinese agitation on mining fields. Nor did he discuss the ruling class experience of grappling with the problems of ruling their colonies, and attempting to understand rival strategic doctrines.

Markus was entirely unreflective about his sources; never considering, for instance, the vast silence about most Chinese-British contact and the possibility that a newspaper’s failure to report such contact might reflect peaceful and tolerant cohabitation which was therefore hardly “news”. Nor did Markus

51 Curthoys notes the importance of storekeepers at Lambing Flat, Race and ethnicity, p. 327.
consider that newspaper reports of European grievances against Chinese people might have been sensationalised, dishonest or slanted to suit the political agenda or financial interests of the editor or owner.

By contrast, Jerome Small’s pathbreaking thesis on the Clunes riot of 1873 found Chinese communities that were integrated into a wider, British-dominated community, and also Chinese communities that had been isolated and ostracised. Significantly, the warning that the Clunes Mining Company had recruited Chinese miners to scab on the strike came from Chinese miners who had a good relationship with their British-Australian neighbours, while the Chinese recruited to break the 1873 miners’ strike came from an isolated community. A struggle between employer and employees was then reported as an anti-Chinese crusade after the event and at the behest of the middle class leadership of the town, including its newspaper. This was how the rest of Australia “experienced” the Clunes struggle; as articles in newspapers which described a supposed racial struggle for survival. Like Small’s thesis, the literature which has emerged over the past decade on Chinese-European contact in the nineteenth century paints a far more differentiated picture than Markus’s focus on conflict.

Charles Price’s exercise in comparative history, *The Great White Walls are Built*, was published in 1974 as a quasi-defence of White Australia. Price compared the movement for exclusion in Australia during the period 1836-1888 with those in New Zealand, British Columbia and California. In his Preface, he argued that the reason for taking this comparative approach was to show that “countries

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with consistently severe restrictions on immigration, such as Australia, have fewer race problems than countries with long periods of free migration”. Like Willard, Price focused on periods of crisis, and on the campaigns to secure exclusionary legislation. He rejected the traditional labourist view that racial exclusion was nothing more than a product of the working class fighting for its economic interests, and posited instead a series of reasons for the adoption of the White Australia policy. These were: economic interest; humanitarian and religious fears at a new kind of slavery and slave trade; fears of being swamped politically and socially by vast numbers of Chinese settlers; the struggle of a new young country to find some identity and social homogeneity; antipathy to strangers of such conspicuously different customs and culture; worries about maintaining law and order; and explicitly racist fears about mixing with peoples of a “lower” civilisation or of “inferior” biological stock. This thesis will show that Price’s list of concerns came a lot closer to describing the key agendas that led to White Australia than most other histories, and provided a significant number of analytical leads. In part, this is because Price’s research was focused on parliamentary debates over exclusionary legislation.

While there are many problems with such a limited approach, Price was unapologetic, arguing that it was the laws and their implementation that most affected non-European immigrants, and “parliamentary proceedings give a reasonable coverage of the issues, opinions and policies involved”. The virtues of this approach are that it focused on the decisions made by the colonial ruling

53 Price, Great white walls, p. x.
54 Price, Great white walls, pp. 117-8. Also pp. 48-50 where he sees these elements present in the pre-gold rush agitation.
55 Price, Great white walls, p. 20.
class as a whole, and that some of the major arguments against exclusion are described and discussed, aspects missing from both Willard and Markus. However the speeches of the politicians were not measured against any external reality except numbers of Chinese and social “disturbances”, and only weakly linked to any wider structure of mainstream political or social thought. Entirely left out was the possibility that racism became a respectable lightning rod for other social discontent. It is a book of description rather than analysis. Price seemed unable to conceive of a ruling class with distinct interests from the mass of the population. Thus speeches and arguments were taken at face value.

The one, significant exception to this historiography of White Australia was the work of Adrian Graves on the Queensland sugar industry. Graves produced a materialist analysis of the Queensland sugar industry to link the exclusion of Pacific Islanders—one of the key elements in the Commonwealth’s White Australia legislation of 1901—with a period of crisis and restructuring. While the abolition of the labour trade was a political act, campaigned for by the Queensland Labor Party and legislated as part of the White Australia legislation of 1901, Graves argued that it was facilitated by the withering of plantation production as a system and the development of a generalised white labour market throughout coastal Queensland. Graves has provided an explanation for an important component of the decision to implement the formal White Australia policy in 1901, but offered little explanation for the political campaign against indentured Islander labour waged by liberals and plebeian activists from the early 1870s, nor for the decision of the Queensland Liberal government

57 Graves, Cane and labour, esp. pp. 62-69.
in 1885 to outlaw Islander recruitment from the end of 1890. I deal in more
detail with Graves and the issues raised by him in Chapter 7.

In the early 1980s, Verity Burgmann sharply attacked the historiography of
White Australia, accusing historians of covering up and justifying the racist
past, blaming the victims of racism for the racism they suffered, and then,
where racism was admitted, shifting the blame for it onto the working class. She
was critical of those radical historians, such as Humphrey McQueen and
Andrew Markus in the 1970s, who, while insisting that the White Australia
policy was racist, also reinforced the mythology that it was the labour
movement that led the fight for exclusion. In these new accounts, the working
class was now imbued with a racist ideology, rather than mere “economic”
motives for their hostility to “coloured labour”. Racism, she argued, was a
ruling class ideology, and racism amongst the working class reflected the
ideological domination of the ruling class.58 Burgmann made three substantive
criticisms of the dominant historical explanation. First, the unreal degree of
power it accorded the labour movement; secondly that, “It is not logical that the
middle class, let alone the capitalist class, would espouse the White Australia
ideal out of any concern for working class wage levels”; and finally that middle-
class racism “barely exists” for most historians. Burgmann offered suggestions
towards an alternative explanation, including an argument that the real
motivation for the policy of racial exclusion lay in ruling class distaste for the
competition provided by Chinese (and other Asian) businesspeople able to
employ Chinese (and other non-European) labour, but did not develop these

58 Verity Burgmann, Writing racism, esp. pp. 84-92; Burgmann, Capital and labour, pp. 21-22.
herself.\textsuperscript{59} Methodologically, she was calling on historians to examine the motives and interests of the ruling class, arguing that these would provide the key to understanding White Australia.\textsuperscript{60}

It is a powerful argument. Almost all historians acknowledge that all classes overwhelmingly supported the adoption of the White Australia policy in 1901; yet apart from Burgmann’s brief suggestions, not one historian has ever examined the \textit{class} motives that led the vast majority of the Anglo-Australian ruling class to take this stand. It seems that the working class has economic and class motives and interests, but not the capitalists, nor the middle class.\textsuperscript{61} This chasm in historical explanation struck Peter Corris most forcefully in 1973:

\begin{quote}
If racialism was...an ingredient in the thinking and behaviour of all Australians, regardless of class, right through the political spectrum, the present emphasis in discussion on working-class and radical racialism will be misleading to any attempt to understand racialism as a whole. What about the bosses?\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

The problem was still present for Ann Curthoys in 1985:

\begin{quote}
The crucial historical question is why the \textit{large} urban employers and pastoralists joined the exclusionary forces, which they did in the early 1860s and again more wholeheartedly during the 1880s.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{59} Burgmann, Capital and labour, pp. 31-33.
\textsuperscript{60} Burgmann, Capital and labour, p. 33; Writing racism, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{61} With this exception, that pastoralists supposedly craved Chinese labourers for their supposed cheapness and docility; JB Hirst, \textit{The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy: New South Wales 1848-1884}, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 160. This argument will be dealt with later.
\textsuperscript{62} Peter Corris, “Racialism: The Australian experience”, \textit{Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand}, vol. 15, no. 61, October 1973, p. 754.
\textsuperscript{63} Curthoys, Racism and class, p. 98, emphasis in original.
However crucial it was, the question has remained unanswered, and largely ignored.

A ruling class policy?

In more general terms, the argument for focusing on possible ruling class agendas for the White Australia policy rests first and foremost on the fact that all the anti-Chinese laws passed in colonial Australia were passed by ruling class parliaments; not just in the ordinary sense that it is the priorities of the largest capitalist enterprises and industries which impose themselves most forcefully on lawmakers (as they do today), but in the narrow sense that to be a member of one of the colonial parliaments required a man to be rich or to have wealthy backers. Election campaigns were expensive, members of parliament were unpaid (except in Victoria), and only the rich could afford to take the time required for parliamentary duties. Moreover, an individual required broad, ruling-class and middle-class support to win a seat in parliament, and this was reflected in the tradition of “requisitioning” candidates, whereby a citizen was petitioned to offer himself for election by “leading men” in the electorate. In all the colonial parliaments, from 1876 to 1888, there was only a handful of members of parliament with links to the organised labour movement, and even fewer for whom those links were their predominant base of support.

In other words, ruling class legislators could largely get what they wanted without public meetings, petitions, protests and riots. For the ruling class more generally, MPs were available to be lobbied privately. The mass media examined all proposed legislation in the light of whatever version of ruling
class interests guided the paper’s editors. They had the social power to explain and justify proposals they agreed with; and they almost unanimously supported restrictive legislation against Chinese immigration, even though some disagreed with the detail of proposed laws. Most of the great public debates in the decades before 1890 reflected divisions within the ruling class, such as the debates over indentured labour in the Queensland sugar industry, over government aid to church schools and the role of religion in education, over taxes and the spending of government money on public works, over land legislation, over Ireland and British foreign and colonial policy, and increasingly over free trade or protectionist tariffs. It was precisely divisions in the ruling class that opened a variety of issues up for public debate, and allowed for agitation to occasionally develop amongst the plebeian classes.

Such a view rejects the orthodoxy that colonial Australia was ultra-democratic, a “working-man’s paradise” in which “the people ruled”. Some historians have argued that the views of politicians reflected those of their electors because they had to get themselves elected by the broad population. Such a view leaves out the ability of the elite to marginalise genuine radicals as “dangerous” and “ignorant” of the needs of politics. In fact colonial democracy was far closer to the model advocated by Joseph Schumpeter, in which ordinary voters merely got to choose between competing groups of rulers. Robert Michels gave us a

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64 This is especially argued for members of parliament representing “working class electorates”; some writers see this as the reason they campaigned against Chinese immigration; Curthoys, Race and ethnicity, p. 443; One of Markus’ strategies is to give details of the background and electorates of anti-Chinese politicians representing “working class” electorates; Markus, Fear and hatred, p. 78 for Cameron; p. 135 for Melville.

realistic way of understanding the rhetoric of democracy in colonial politics when he observed:

>A conservative candidate who should present himself to his electors by declaring to them that he did not regard them as capable of playing an active part in influencing the destinies of the country, and should tell them that for this reason they ought to be deprived of the suffrage would be a man of incomparable sincerity but politically insane.\(^{66}\)

Some of the techniques necessary for capitalists and their managers, lawyers and priests to retain political control within a system of universal suffrage were also spelled out by one of its most trenchant opponents, the Italian elitist, Gaetano Mosca:

>All those who, by wealth, education, intelligence, or guile, have an aptitude for leading a community of men, and a chance of doing so—in other words, all the cliques in the ruling class—have to bow to universal suffrage…and also, if occasion requires, cajole and fool it.\(^{67}\)

According to Girvetz, “Thus, ironically, the democratic myth is one that an elitist society, which despises democracy, must perpetuate and preserve.”\(^{68}\) Apart from the myth-making process they highlight, his comments remind us that historians must be especially careful not to take any political rhetoric at face value, least of all in colonial Australia.


\(^{67}\) Quoted in Girvetz, Democracy and elitism, p. 34.

\(^{68}\) Girvetz, Democracy and elitism, p. 33.
Nowhere is the importance of examining ruling class agendas clearer than in Queensland, which led all other colonies in the passage of more restrictive anti-Chinese legislation between 1876 and 1884. The upper house of the parliament which passed the 1876 and 1877 laws was dominated by squatters who were, in the mythology, the champions of “cheap coloured labour”.

69 The Conservative party in Queensland, based as it was on pastoralists, sugar planters and mining capital, was in its majority strongly anti-Chinese from 1877 onwards. In 1878 it was Conservative Queensland politicians and newspapers that mobilised most strongly in support of the intercolonial seamen’s strike against their replacement by Chinese workers. Moreover, before 1890, Queensland’s trade union movement was the weakest of the four eastern mainland colonies. JB Dalton has argued that, “Unionism in Queensland really began in 1883”, with no Queensland unions represented at the first two intercolonial trade union congresses, in 1879 (Sydney) and 1884 (Melbourne). The Brisbane Trades and

69 This labourist mythology is summed up in William Lane, The workingman’s paradise: An Australian labour novel, with an introduction by Michael Wilding, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1980; also Banjo Paterson’s “A bushman’s song”:

I asked a cove for shearin’ once along the Marthaguy:
“We shear non-union here,” says he. “I call it scab,” says I.
I looked along the shearin’ floor before I turned to go—
There were eight or ten dashed Chinamen a-shearin’ in a row.


Labour Council was only formed in late 1885, but even then, unionism “remained relatively weak in the face of heavy immigration and limited settlement on the land which combined to create a large labour market on which employers could draw.”

The passage of anti-Chinese laws in Queensland reflects neither anti-Chinese agitation, nor anti-Chinese violence on the goldfields or elsewhere. There was agitation against Chinese miners on Queensland goldfields from 1867 to 1872, and a series of brutal attacks, but no move towards restriction. An examination of the conservative *Brisbane Courier* newspaper for the years 1876 and 1877, the first years in which anti-Chinese legislation was passed in the Queensland parliament, showed just one report of a violent protest against the substantial Chinese immigration into the Palmer River goldfields. A crowd of whites had on two separate days prevented Chinese people from landing at Trinity Bay (Cairns). The government sent extra police to the area and the tensions subsided. Significantly, this incident occurred after the passing of the first anti-Chinese laws in parliament, and a few days after the Governor, Cairns, reserved them for the consideration of the Colonial Office.

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72 Cronin, *Yellow agony*, pp. 279-81.
73 This was first raised in parliament, *QPD*, vol. XX, p. 1018 (LA Adjournment debate, 18 October 1876), and then *QPD*, vol. XX, p. 1046 (LA Question without notice, 19 October 1876).
74 This was the Gold Fields Amendment Bill, reserved on 11 October. The actions at Trinity Bay were on the 15th and 17th October. The Governor was then sent a substantial petition against Chinese immigration from Cairns (the place), 18 October, letter 76/2870 in QSA, Col Sec inwards corresp., SRS5253-1-229.
This thesis examines the development of ruling class thought and action on the issue of Chinese and other “coloured” immigration, in relation to the strategic environment in which the Anglo-Australian ruling class found itself, its strategies for economic and political development, its tactics for containing class tensions, and the tensions within the ruling class on these (and other) issues. At the time, the attempt to formulate effective strategies was done within the parameters of existing British imperial thought. Virtually all previous historians of White Australia have treated this context too superficially, as they have necessarily neglected the occasional, but important, apostasies initiated in Australia as the local ruling class ditched significant imperial “principles” in their own, local class interest.

One advantage of this methodology is that the White Australia policy is seen as both durable and historically contingent. The durability of the decision reached in 1888 to effectively end Chinese immigration, and the ease with which it was extended to all non-Europeans in the years 1896-1902, suggest that some profound, general and ongoing interest was involved, one necessarily congenial to the ruling class and the politicians in every colony who made the laws and to the administrators who organised their implementation.

The White Australia policy shaped, and impinged on, three of the great general ruling class agendas: who will do the work? how shall the state be constructed? and what form shall their ideological hegemony take? White Australia was both a population policy, and a definition of nationality and nationalism. It also imposed certain costs on sections of the ruling class. It limited the labour force, eliminated the possibility of different state structures in different parts of the continent, and locked the developed south-eastern centres into taking responsibility for a vast area of the earth’s surface in which there was minimal
capitalist development. White Australia worked against any strategy of economic integration into Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when Asian capitalism was starting to grow spectacularly, most notably in Japan, and Australian exports to the region were also growing rapidly. Finally, the ruling class was also locked into promoting a certain ideology of Australian nationalism, one which emphasised protection of white living standards from competition from poorer countries, and this in turn limited its own freedom of action. Given these significant consequences, it is remarkable that for the most part, the dominant capitalists, politicians and ideological institutions of the Australian bourgeoisie worked assiduously to sustain White Australia from 1901 to the late 1950s. While it is true that great national policies and structures also influence the structure of the ruling class, this strong support for White Australia over a long period suggests that the policy strongly reflected ruling class needs. Had it not, broad groups among the rich and powerful would have begun organising against it long before it was abandoned.

My argument also suggests reasons for the gradual abandonment of the White Australia policy in the 1960s and 1970s, as many of the conditions which gave rise to it changed, confronting the ruling class with new challenges and the need to develop new strategies. This methodology posits working-class, ruling-class and middle-class people as active participants in the making of, and

75 Sandra M Tweedie, “Between depressions: Australian dilemmas in the quest for Asian markets, 1893/1933”, MComm (Hons) thesis, University of New South Wales, 1982. John Fitzgerald has also looked at some of the perverse consequences of the Anglo-Australian decision to create a continental nation in hostile antagonism to Asia, “European settler colonialism and national security ideologies in Australian history” in R Leaver and D Cox (eds), Middling, meddling, muddling, Issues in Australian foreign policy, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards (NSW), 1997, pp. 91-119.
response to, the White Australia policy. Conventional historiography has either ignored the ruling class, or built its analysis around a small fraction of capitalists—squatters, sugar planters and others supportive of racially oppressed “cheap” labour. It has painted the rich and powerful as either ultimately recognising the validity of working class concerns, or as helpless in the face of working class mobilisation. These approaches are unsustainable given the nature of colonial society.

None of this is meant to imply that the ruling class was always united over “white Australia” strategies. Marx called the bourgeoisie “hostile brothers”, and the literature already discussed is replete with examples of ruling class conflict, including the supplanting of one ruling class element by another in the struggle for domination. Indeed, the 1888 decision to effectively shut Chinese immigration out of the Australian continent was reached despite a measure of ruling class opposition, and at considerable economic cost to some South Australian and Queensland capitalists, and to the South Australian state, which had invested nearly a million pounds in a railway project that was made unviable by the anti-Chinese laws. The way these elements acquiesced in their defeat suggests that it was imposed by the wider ruling class, with whom they had so much in common, rather than by hostile working class elements, against whom they might have been expected to show stronger and more strident resistance, and to find other ruling class support for such resistance.

Methodology

The methodology of this thesis has been to examine the arguments of ruling class political leaders, and to link them with the broader structures of thought to which they refer; to seek empirical confirmation that this broader agenda actually related to real issues facing governments or the ruling class; and to plot ways in which these ideas shaped policy and strategy in a wider sense. Consequently, a large number of secondary sources were used in searching for insights into the key elements of bourgeois thought in general, and also more specifically on British anti-slavery debates, the political strategies of John Stuart Mill, imperial policy, global political rivalries in the 1880s, ideas of colonisation and discussions of social control.

Newspapers were a major source, of fundamental importance when studying the structure and content of political thought. The *Brisbane Courier* was used extensively for political and conservative opinion in Queensland around which a significant part of my narrative is built. I also drew heavily on Sydney’s *Evening News*, the colony’s largest circulation newspaper, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There were a very small number of high quality journals published in the period, including *Melbourne Review*, *The Sydney Quarterly Magazine* and the *Victorian Review*, an important monthly publication which drew contributions from many of the leading intellectuals in Australia during its seven year life from 1879 to 1886. Here the reader can often find ruling-class intellectuals debating national policy in a sophisticated manner. Local newspapers were also valuable, as were scandalous, satirical and polemical magazines, such as the *Lantern* (Adelaide), the *Stockwhip* (Sydney) and the various mutations of Harold Grey’s *Pilgrim* (Sydney). Finally I undertook a
major project studying regional Queensland newspapers during periods of racist agitation, guided by Denis Cryle’s *The press in colonial Queensland*.77

Among the key primary sources used in this thesis were parliamentary papers, the record of parliamentary debates, and Colonial Secretaries’ correspondence for New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. These were the major sources for strategic and policy discussion within and between governments. Also important in this regard was the private correspondence of colonial political leaders. Here the most fruitful collections were those of Sir Henry Parkes (Mitchell Library), Sir Samuel Griffith (Mitchell Library), CH Pearson (Latrobe Library), Sir Samuel Way (Mortlock Library) and Sir Thomas McIlwraith (John Oxley Library). I found little to be gained from the papers of businessmen and women. Even from those businesspeople who became politicians, the surviving archival records are dominated by immediate business concerns and while I used the papers of people such as Robert Philp, PF McDonald (Queensland), John Warren, and George and Edward Hawker (South Australia), they contributed only marginally to this thesis.

I have not attempted to write a history of the development of racial thought in Australia; nor describe the development of the new White Australia nationalism that became a significant factor ideologically in the late 1880s. It is my belief that the contours of racial and nationalist thought in Australia were substantially shaped by Australian ruling class priorities, as well as by the imported racism of the British empire, and I hope that this thesis provides a useful starting point for subsequent efforts to describe and explain these. Nor

77 Denis Cryle, *The press in colonial Queensland: A social and political history 1845-1875*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1989.
have I systematically researched the various anti-Chinese movements, although I examined them where relevant. I found little serious history of the many radical-plebeian movements of the time, movements led by middle class people and mobilising people described as “working class” in the daily press. These would be useful subjects for future research.

I have focused primarily on New South Wales and Queensland as the two colonies which played the greatest role, and restricted this thesis to the years 1876-1888. Charles Price considered 1888 to be:

the year by which the Canadians, Americans, Australians and New Zealanders, after much debate and many changes of mind, had at length thrashed out their feelings and attitudes to the Chinese and had decided to impose restrictions tantamount to complete exclusion from permanent settlement. It was then relatively easy to extend these restrictions to other peoples.78

In choosing this time frame I do not seek to diminish the importance of earlier or later developments. The policy of preventing nearly all non-European people from settling in Australia had developed, fitfully, from the 1840s, when liberals in the New South Wales Legislative Council and self-styled representatives of the working class had led a campaign against the importation of several

78 Price, Great white walls, p. xi. This opinion is shared by Ann Curthoys, “Liberalism and exclusionism: A prehistory of the White Australia policy” in Jayasuriya, Walker and Gothard (eds), Legacies of White Australia, p 31. David Johanson wrote in 1960, “The period from the mid-seventies to 1890 is the decisive one in the history of the White Australia policy.” See “History of the White Australia policy” in Immigration Reform Group (ed Kenneth Rivett), Immigration: Control or colour bar? The background to ‘White Australia’ and a proposal for change, Melbourne, 1962, p 6. For John Hirst, “Before the Commonwealth was established, the colonies had acted together to exclude Chinese and other Asians. Federation was not needed to make the White Australia policy”, The sentimental nation: The making of the Australian Commonwealth, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 22.
thousand indentured Chinese labourers. Their concerns revolved around the impact of large scale indentured labour on society—the “immorality” of the Chinese, the liberal fear that Chinese labour would inhibit British immigration—and the supposed similarity of the importation to the reviled slave trade. In her subtle and important PhD thesis, Ann Curthoys argued that this liberal opposition “was directly derived from the Colonial Office”—hardly a bastion of working class and labour politics—“and radical positions”—by which is meant, those who shared the politics of elite liberals such as John Stuart Mill. The arrival of tens of thousands of Chinese people as part of the gold rushes, and the consequent competition between diggers for declining quantities of alluvial gold, provided agitators with the opportunity to organise a series of violent race riots in Victoria and New South Wales, and led politicians to pass the first legislation restricting specifically Chinese immigration into Victoria (1855), South Australia (1857) and New South Wales (1861). Curthoys argues that the significance of the gold rush riots in New South Wales was not that they were the major reason for the passing of anti-Chinese immigration laws in 1861, but that they tipped the balance in the unelected Legislative Council between those favouring indentured labour and those opposed. Nevertheless, the combination of anti-Chinese riots and anti-Chinese legislation left a major residue of anti-Chinese racism in Australian politics at all levels.

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79 Ann Curthoys, Race and Ethnicity, p. 90. “Radical” in this context means British radical liberalism of the 1830s-40s; the politics of John Stuart Mill and their impact on the later anti-Chinese debates are discussed in chapter six of this thesis.

80 Curthoys, Race and ethnicity, p. 314.
But whatever conclusions were drawn by either rich or poor people during the gold rushes, all three anti-Chinese immigration laws were quickly repealed, so that by 1867 there were no legal obstacles to Chinese immigration into any of the Australian colonies. Curthoys extensively documented a reversal of the gold rush period exclusionism in New South Wales, as townspeople came to realise the value of a local Chinese community, both for the economic activity they generated, and especially for their skill at growing much-needed vegetables and fruit. Within two years of the notorious Lambing Flat (Young) anti-Chinese riot of 1861, civic leaders from the town of Forbes were telling the NSW government that the reintroduction of Chinese people was an “absolute necessity”. Even at Young, Chinese miners were ultimately allowed back despite the bitterness aroused by the riot. Curthoys also described a low level of newspaper and popular agitation against Chinese people for a prolonged period, a quiescence which ended decisively in 1878, with the famous seamen’s strike, in which European seafarers successfully fought the employment of Chinese crews by the Australasian Steam Navigation company.

There were important developments after 1888, which included South Australia’s abortive attempt to set up a system of Indian indentured labour for the Northern Territory and the subsequent debate over handing the Northern Territory over to a future federal government; Queensland’s repeal of the law ending the recruitment of indentured Islander labour and the subsequent populist campaign for ending the labour trade; the South Australian proposal for a conference of the three colonies with tropical territory to discuss “coloured

81 Willard, p. 35.
82 Curthoys, Race and ethnicity, ch 6; also pp. 252-3.
labour”; schemes to encourage Japanese immigration; Queensland’s adherence to the Anglo-Japanese Treaty; the widening of the 1888 laws in a number of colonies to exclude all Asian and African immigrants; and the federation debates that saw Indigenous people lose the right to vote and other important rights in the federal constitution. Thus, while the legislation of 1901 represented a turning point in the exclusion of non-European immigrants to Australia, it was a modest one. The principle of White Australia had been adopted by colonial premiers at their conference of 1888, and focused on one national group—the Chinese. When significant immigration from other Asian countries, in particular India and Japan, was seriously mooted in the 1890s, the response was another intercolonial conference in 1896 which adopted the principle of excluding all “coloured races”. Some colonies had passed exclusionary legislation which was later modified to incorporate a superficially non-discriminatory language test, a dress rehearsal for the later Commonwealth system.\textsuperscript{83} The granting of powers over immigration to the proposed federal government was a feature of all the draft constitutions of the 1890s, and this represented widespread agreement amongst the leading politicians that Australian immigration policy would be uniform and harshly restrictive.

One feature of this thesis is the extensive use of direct quotation, and on a few occasions, repetitive quotation to make a similar point. The positions of many key ruling class people and institutions, such as the colonial pastoralists, the Sydney Morning Herald, and the various Legislative Councils, have been seriously misrepresented at times, and extensive direct quotation has been considered necessary to establish my analysis of their opinions. Extensive

\textsuperscript{83} Willard, pp. 109-115.
quotation is also necessary to establish that opinions being ascribed are representative, and not exceptional, and to establish the ideological context within which debates took place, and decisions made.

Summary of thesis argument

This thesis sees the White Australia policy, not as the inevitable product of the racism that saturated colonial Australia, but the product of the dominant agendas of the Anglo-Australian ruling class. The first concern was strategic: that a significant Chinese immigration, especially into areas of low European population, could involve the risk of weakening or even loss of Australian control of that part of the continent. Major sections of the ruling class believed they faced a struggle over which people would colonise Australia. This suggested the possibility of future war with China, or the possibility that a large Chinese population could be a fifth column during a war with one of the major European powers.

To these fears was added the dilemma of how to manage production and exploit labour in northern, tropical Australia. If the British/Australian ruling class failed to develop and populate the north, it would stand as a constant invitation to any other powerful nation wanting colonies, or land for settlement. One of the racist myths of British imperialism—a leftover from slavery—was that “white men” could not labour in the tropics, and this was widely accepted
in the colonies. That left the plantation model as the only acceptable alternative, where a tiny population of whites supervised and ruled over a large “coloured” labouring population which worked cheaply, under indenture, for several years, with very few political rights—a society like that of Mauritius, Fiji, or the Caribbean sugar colonies. A century of anti-slavery agitation meant that such a model represented an economic, social and political threat to those who wanted a society based on free-labour capitalism and parliamentary rule. It would also have consigned such societies to economic and social backwardness, producing simple commodities instead of advanced manufactures and other sophisticated products. In the minds of ruling class strategists, the recent American Civil War showed the dire consequences of a racially-stratified society. Furthermore, a plantation economy employing large numbers of Chinese or other Asian labourers could involve importing a potential military danger, reinforcing the fears that led to their first agenda. Having stolen a continent they were unable to fully use or develop, they feared other powers wanting a share, and they feared those who could develop the continent pushing them aside. Those apprehensions grew as Australia’s isolation diminished.

Thus the second major agenda of the dominant elements in the colonial ruling class was the minimisation of indentured “coloured labour”, so that a modern, industrial economy could be built. The dangers associated with a plantation economy could have easily been eliminated by abolishing the special indenture

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laws that enabled planters to so ruthlessly exploit Islanders, but Australian capitalists had invested heavily in plantations in the South Pacific. Moreover, capitalists wanted the ability to indenture white labour for more conventional employment. Rather than attack the plantation system and give equal rights to Islander labourers—an approach consistent with working class agendas—they preferred to protect the plantation system offshore by excluding and victimising the labourers, and using racial stereotyping to do so. Nothing more clearly indicates the ruling class nature of the dominant discourse around this issue and the way it was resolved, than this.

The third major agenda of the colonial ruling class was the construction of an “homogeneous” population, both demographically and culturally. This was justified using theories articulated by John Stuart Mill, who had warned that representative democracy required national homogeneity. The pursuit of homogeneity was not an excuse to exclude Chinese and other non-European people; it lay behind ruling class attempts to integrate the Catholic Irish through state-run education systems.

Chinese people were the major group regarded as unable to be assimilated into Australia’s British culture. Chinese people were not Christian and could not, it was feared, be disciplined using the ideological methods used on people of British origin. A large Chinese population would threaten existing political structures and techniques for social control. Chinese camps were notorious for providing a space for “larrikins” and prostitutes. Chinese people were disciplined by their own secret societies which raised the prospect of alternative centres of power. To admit large numbers of Chinese to British-Australian nationality would undermine the effect of existing nationalist and racist ideologies on the white population and necessitate the construction of new
nationalist and class collaborationist ideologies. Such a strategy was not even considered.

These somewhat separate issues came to a head in 1888. When China complained to the British government about Australian anti-Chinese laws, the British demanded explanations from the colonies. The “disloyalty” of London was greeted with anger and dismay. The tension was heightened when thousands of Chinese labourers entered the Northern Territory, which was under South Australia’s control, to work on the Darwin-Pine Creek railway. Through the 1880s, the South Australian Legislative Assembly tried five times to restrict Chinese immigration to the Northern Territory and five times the bills were rejected by the Legislative Council.\(^{85}\) The politicians representing the majority of the whole Australian ruling class faced a challenge to their ability to shape the kind of society they wanted. An imposed resolution to the “Chinese question” was thus necessitated by the intransigence of South Australia’s upper house and the fraction of the ruling class it represented, and by the lack of confidence colonial political leaders felt in the British government. By November 1887, the governments of the three eastern colonies had agreed in principle to meet to plan more extreme exclusionary legislation, and some political leaders were clearly looking for opportunities to create a crisis that would resolve the issue.

\(^{85}\) These will be discussed in chapters 9 and 10; the six bills were:
1880: all South Australia: defeated in Legislative Council (private member’s bill of JC Bray)
1880: Northern Territory only: defeated in Legislative Council
1881: all South Australia: amended to South Australia proper in Legislative Council
1886: extend to Northern Territory: defeated in Legislative Council
1887: extent to Northern Territory: defeated in Legislative Council
1888: all South Australia with same provisions for Northern Territory: adopted
The South Australian government’s representative in the Northern Territory created a furore when he reported that hundreds of Chinese people were heading for the central Australian ruby fields, and the government used this report to impose restrictions to be reviewed by parliament. In Victoria and New South Wales a crisis was manufactured by the arrival of the SS *Afghan* at Melbourne on 27 April 1888 carrying 268 Chinese passengers. The Victorian government forced the captain to leave without disembarking the 52 Chinese passengers bound for Melbourne. Even before the ship reached Sydney, hysteria was at fever pitch. Tens of thousands of people marched to Parliament, led by the Mayor of Sydney, and there were attempts to rush the chamber of the Legislative Council. The Parkes government promised to stop any of the Chinese from the *Afghan*, and the three other ships in the harbour, from landing; and brought retrospective legislation into Parliament to legalise its actions and dramatically reduce the number of Chinese allowed to enter New South Wales. In Brisbane, the day after the *Afghan* arrived in Sydney, rioters smashed up the Chinese district. Within six weeks, the colonies had met at an intercolonial conference, held on 12-14 June, and agreed to common legislation to virtually prohibit Chinese immigration. As awkward as the Australian actions were, the colonial legislation was approved in London.

The crisis of 1888 cannot be understood simply by looking at the agitation or rhetoric of the anti-Chinese campaigners. Only an awareness of the fundamental interests involved allows us to understand the crisis, and the role

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86 See Markus, Fear and hatred, pp. 143-4; IM Britain, “Victoria, the Chinese and the federal idea, 1887-1888”, *ANU Historical Journal*, no. 6, November 1969, pp. 49-54 for Victoria.
played by public mobilisation in helping force a conclusion. This analysis is reinforced by the durability of the settlement of 1888. Most of the dynamics that led to the crisis of 1888 remained operative for the following 70 years and more. The Anglo-Australian ruling class held onto its continent grimly, fearing other powers or peoples attempting to use it or take control of it. Japan’s rise to military power saw those strategic fears shift, most especially from 1905 to 1945. Australian nationalism was constructed as racist and exclusionary, and proved an effective means of encouraging class collaboration and containing radical working class militancy. The issue of slavery or semi-slavery is the one that lost relevance as indentured labour systems proved increasingly profitable, and sugar and other commodity producers moved to a new system based on family farms and centralised milling. One consequence of this is that historians have radically misunderstood elements of the rhetoric used in the debates over Chinese immigration and Islander labour.

There were a number of second rank issues in the decision for exclusion. One is the centrality of gold in ruling class and middle class hopes for accelerated economic development and political liberalisation, and their concern that Chinese miners dug up the gold and took it home, rather than investing it in Australia. There were widespread and false allegations that Chinese people were immoral, and used opium to seduce white women. These played a

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89 One of the main instruments in promoting the idea of Chinese immorality was the “Report of the Select Committee into Common Lodging Houses”, chaired by Angus Cameron MLA, NSW V&P, 1875-6, vol. 6, pp. 845-68. It was a completely dishonest exercise, aimed to vilify Chinese people (and, I would argue, rescue Cameron’s political career), and had a vast impact on public opinion.
significant role in whipping up racist hostility to the Chinese, but were not central to ruling class strategic thinking. Sir Henry Parkes repeatedly made a point of rejecting these allegations; but did not soften his hostility to Chinese people. A range of small and medium-sized capitalists complained about Chinese competition: furniture makers, tobacco growers, fruit growers and teamsters. Mobilisation by these groups did not make Australian policy, but contributed to the strength of the exclusionist position. So too, in a more significant way, did the trade union, plebeian and bourgeois-dominated anti-Chinese campaigns.

Organisation of the thesis

In chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical assumptions of this thesis, which lie in Marx’s historical materialism and his theorisation of base and superstructure. I outline and deal with attacks on this from postmodernism, and the alternative theories of racism developed by writers such as John Rex and Pierre van den Berghe grounded in Weberian sociology. These underpin the “contact” theory used by Andrew Markus and other writers. I argue for an understanding of colonial Australia as a class society, deal with objections to that analysis, and use an understanding of base and superstructure to outline a Marxist theory of racism.

The body of the thesis is broadly divided between three chapters, 3 to 5, which outline the three major ruling class agendas, and five predominantly narrative chapters, 6 to 10.
In chapter 3 I discuss the first ruling class agenda, colonisation, and the perception that Chinese immigration threatened British control of sections of Australia. I illustrate my argument through a narrative of the attempts made by the Queensland parliament in 1876-77 to restrict Chinese immigration.

In chapter 4 I discuss the second ruling class agenda, anti-slavery, the danger that systems of unfree labour would create some kind of semi-slave economy and society, and the belief that any substantial Chinese or “coloured” labour force would catalyse the development of a racialised, unfree system of labour. I outline the specifically bourgeois structure of anti-slavery thought, and the post-slavery British critique of other unfree labour systems, including the danger that they would produce a stunted economy churning out commodities, rather than a modern, wealthy state. I lastly discuss the revisionist histories which have challenged the idea that Pacific Islanders were “slaves” in some sense.

In chapter 5 I discuss the third ruling class agenda, the need for a racially and culturally homogeneous society to entrench social control by the capitalist state. I argue that this was legitimised, if not grounded, in the theories of John Stuart Mill, and move to locate the origins of this element in Mill’s thought in that of the aristocratic anti-capitalism of the Coleridgians, their rejection of enlightenment liberalism, and Mill’s own desire for a politics of social stability that protected bourgeois privilege. The chapter then tests the seriousness of this discourse by seeing if there were other ways in which homogeneity was pursued by the colonial ruling class; in the process briefly discussing the ideas behind the systems of national education, in choosing the national origin of European immigrants, and disputes over how to deal with Irish Australians.
Having theorised the three major ruling class agendas that led to White Australia, I move to offer some narrative explanations for various “coloured labour” and Chinese immigration laws, explanations grounded in the three agendas. In chapters 6 and 7, I look at the development of the politics of “coloured labour” in Queensland from 1878 to 1886. Queensland was the only colony in which large-scale indentured labour was employed, and the politics of “coloured labour” were central to all political debate in the colony over this period. I show that, not only did Queensland lead in the restriction of Chinese immigration, but also that major sections of the ruling class combined to deprive pastoralists of indentured Pacific Island labour. Attempts to set up a system of indentured Indian labour were defeated by the Liberals in the 1883 election and subsequent legislation; and this led to an attempt by sugar planters and their allies to separate North Queensland from the South. Northern separation was initially resisted by all bourgeois politicians in the South, Conservative and Liberal, with major sections of Conservative politics determined that any system of indentured “coloured labour” would be controlled by a state dominated by southern bourgeoisie.

In chapter 8, I use the controversy around the seamen’s strike of 1878-9 to discuss the class logic of anti-Chinese racism, and in particular, the argument that it had an anti-capitalist dynamic. I look at the attitudes of the Sydney Morning Herald, showing them to be caught between a hostility to Chinese immigration and a fear that anti-Chinese agitation was anti-capitalist, protectionist, and tending towards communism. I contrast their position with those taken by a range of other conservative papers in New South Wales and Queensland. Finally, I sketch ways in which ruling class politicians such as Sir Henry Parkes and Sir Thomas McIlwraith were able to use anti-Chinese agitation to contain working class and plebeian discontent towards them.
In chapters 9 and 10, I examine the factors leading to the Chinese immigration crisis of 1888, and the story of the crisis and its resolution. I present a new narrative of this pivotal crisis, illustrating the centrality of ruling class politicians in events, the disputes among them, and their final decisive act in warning the South Australian upper house that it faced a choice between closing the door to Chinese immigration at Darwin, and missing out on federation.

The anti-Chinese legislation and hysteria of the late 1880s was an element in the process by which an increasingly wealthy and powerful local ruling class established a measure of independence from London, partly as a means of remaining a loyal part of the empire. White Australia was a declaration that Australian politics would be driven by a fear of Asia and Asians, a standpoint which remains—despite all the talk of engagement and multiculturalism—a significant element of government decision-making today.

A note on words and comparisons

Nineteenth-century usages often saw the term “working class” applied to anyone who actually worked; the counterpoint being the capitalist who lived through risking their capital. I have used “working class” to mean people employed by capitalists, and who had no managerial role. I have used the word “plebeian” to denote a broader layer of society, including working class people, free selectors, artisans, self-employed people and employers who worked alongside their one or two staff. The phrase is valuable in representing radical activism within this wide social layer, and there is a long tradition of this in
Australia. I have used it for organisations such as the Working Men’s Defence Association in Sydney from 1877, which is briefly discussed in chapter 8. I distinguish such plebeian activism from the more conventionally bourgeois-led organisations such as the Political Reform Union from 1878, or the Protectionist-controlled Anti-Chinese League in Sydney in 1887-88, whose leaderships were far from plebeian.\textsuperscript{90}

I have capitalised the words Conservative and Liberal to identify association with a political network. This is relevant in Queensland and Victoria, and to some extent South Australia, where there were identifiable parties. The use of lower-case conservative or liberal denotes a general political orientation.

The word “race” was used very loosely in the period covered by this thesis. It was often used as a synonym for nationality or people, and its use did not necessarily imply a racist outlook.

In order to make sums of money intelligible, I have provided a rough estimate of equivalents, on the basis of £1 in the period 1876-88 being worth $300 in 2006.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{90} Markey describes the PRU as “a bourgeois-led protectionist and democratic body with working class support”, a description I would agree with, Populist politics, p. 70.

\textsuperscript{91} I have done this on a wages basis; estimating that the average wage for a competent labourer in the 1880s was around 40 shillings or £2 a week where no board or food was provided, while in 2006 a labourer would earn at least $30,000 per annum. See, for instance, the survey of wages in the iron trades in \textit{SMH} 1 July 1879, p. 5, cols. 1-2. Most wages are given in hourly figures, but Chapman & Co. labourers received 36s a week. In September 2006, the legal federal minimum wage in Australia was $12.75 hour, or $484.50 week, Australian Fair Pay Commission, Wage-Setting Decision and Reasons for Decision, October 2006 [online] \url{http://www.fairpay.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/222E8249-FCA4-42BB-93CD-32B906C2662B/0/AFPC_Oct2006_Wagesettingdecision_Fulldocument.pdf}, p. 19 [accessed 1 December 2006]. Most labourers earn more than this. At the ASN docks, skilled mechanics in 1879 earned 10s to 11s a day, or £3 to £3 6s a week; comparable workers in 2006 would expect to
earn well over $900 to $1000 a week, suggesting my index may err on the side of understatement. Workers today pay significant amounts of income tax, but also receive unemployment benefits, medical insurance and other welfare benefits unavailable in the nineteenth century.

One alternative method of comparison would be to use long term price indices. The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ calculations show that if consumer prices were indexed at 100 in 1945, they were between 45 and 56 in the period 1877-88, with an average of 51.3; whereas in September 2006, the index was 2766, a multiple of 54 times. From Year Book Australia 2002. [online] http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/632C047B9DC5DA2ACA256F2A000E CF0B?opendocument [accessed 1 December 2006] I calculated the price index by taking the average of 1989 (1714) and 1990 (1839), and multiplied it by the index for September 2006 (155.7), based on a base-point of 100 for 1989-90 [online] http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/e8ae5488b598839cca25682000131612/938da570a34a8edaca2568a900139350/OpenDocument [accessed 1 December 2006] Of course, over such long time periods, these figures are only valid as orders of magnitude.

This suggests a three-fold increase in living standards, making any compromise approach problematic. I regard the wage-based figure as being more valid because the subjective understanding of the reader is more strongly related to their weekly or annual income, than to comparative prices.