The Menzies Government and the Hungarian refugees: An issue of race?

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My research project at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre (APMC) focused on the decision by the Menzies government to allow permanent resettlement of 14,000 Hungarian refugees in Australia during 1956 and 1957. As my PhD thesis focuses on the link between race and Australian government responses to refugees, I was interested to examine whether the Menzies government employed a race agenda in its refugee response.

Background

Colonial Australia harboured a great fear of the outsider. Aware of its proximity to Asia and the Pacific Islands, fears of a ‘yellow peril’, ‘red menace’ and ‘hordes’ from the North dominated early Australia thought. The existence of such fears led to the creation and consolidation of a racially exclusionist policy, the White Australia Policy, which would become one of the most important and enduring policies in Australian history.

The White Australia Policy arose from a Commonwealth government objective of creating and maintaining a mono-racial Australia. By the 1950s, this usually manifested in restrictions on immigration. It was thought that certain races were incapable of participating in democracy and that immigrant labour would undermine wage levels and living standards, creating a subordinate class.

In the period between 1947 and 1956, refugees were admitted to Australia to boost its population and, at times, to relieve specific labour shortages. However refugees were largely selected on the basis of their ‘suitability’ as immigrants. Potential immigrants were ranked according to their suitability (based on colour) for admission and assistance.

Research at APMC

The vast majority of Hungarian refugees arrived to Australia as a result of the brutal repression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. As tens of thousands of people were forced to flee for their lives, Australia offered sanctuary for up to 3000 refugees from Hungary who fled across the border into Austria. This figure was subsequently raised and before the end of 1957 a total of 14,000 ‘fifty sixers’ had arrived in Australia.

Despite the apparent compassion of the Menzies government during this time, my paper suggests that the acceptance of 14,000 Hungarian refugees was based largely on economic rather than humanitarian reasons. As far as the Menzies government was concerned, the shipping of post-war refugees by the International Refugee Organisation to resettlement countries was a golden opportunity to populate Australia with Europeans at a very low cost.

With a population of around 9 million, Australia was worried that the continent could be vulnerable to the newly independent East Asian states, and in particular, Communist China. Anxious to increase its population and clear in the knowledge that the British Isles could not provide all the immigrants required to facilitate the rapid growth it desired, the Menzies government was forced to look elsewhere. Australia was also under increasing international pressure to relax its harsh immigration policies. Consequently the Menzies government, although unwilling to dispense with the White Australia Policy, hoped to ameliorate the bad reputation the policy earned Australia overseas.

In this way my paper suggests that the acceptance of 14,000 Hungarian refugees can be seen as an attempt by the Australian government to deflect international criticism over its immigration policies. Accepting the refugees enabled the government to argue that it was unable, rather than unwilling, to accept further immigration from Asia.
**Research findings**

My research in Canberra uncovered a vast amount of literature and evidence to support the idea of a race agenda in Australian immigration policy during the Menzies era. Letters between the Department of Immigration in Australia and the Chief Migration Officer in Austria revealed that the Menzies government had played an important role in overseeing refugee selections, ensuring that planes bound for Australia were not filled with hardship cases.

Similarly, the research revealed that Australia saw the refugee program in labour-market terms and selected the most intelligent and best trained. The Menzies government was not concerned about the plight of tens of thousands of displaced Hungarians, instead motivated by the wish to significantly increase Australia’s population with desirable immigrants.

**Sources used**

**Australian Prime Ministers Centre Library**

The Library at the APMC was a valuable resource, providing access to Parliamentary Papers and a complete Hansard collection. In particular, the Hansard collection provided me with a comprehensive history of refugee debates in parliament both prior to and during 1956. This allowed me to gain an insight into the views propounded by both political parties and highlighted the major issues faced by the Menzies government.

The APMC Library also holds an extensive collection of political biography. This was useful in providing me with an understanding of the key political figures involved in the Hungarian refugee debates and allowed me to gain an understanding into the motivations of the Menzies government.

**National Library of Australia**

The vast collection at the NLA proved invaluable to my research project at the APMC and towards my thesis as a whole. In particular, the personal papers of Sir Robert Menzies (MS 4738) and the personal papers of Arthur Calwell (MS 4738) gave me access to a first-hand account of the sentiments held by various members of the government and opposition regarding race and immigration. Moreover, the personal papers allowed me to view the largely undiscussed processes used by the Menzies government to prevent those deemed ‘undesirable’ from entering Australia.

**National Archives of Australia**

The Department of Immigration Records (Series A446) located at the National Archives were very useful to my research as they provided a context into immigration patterns during this period. Also invaluable to my research were the records on Hungarian refugee arrivals (Series A1838) and the records regarding allegations of persons of undesirable persuasion (Series A6980).

**Outcomes**

The research conducted during the six-week scholarship at the APMC will form the basis of the fourth chapter of my thesis entitled ‘Australian government responses to refugees: 1945-1975’. My focus on the Menzies government during the scholarship tenure has enabled me to shed light into the immigration processes into one of the lesser known refugee intakes in Australian history.

The research conducted will also be used as the foundation of a paper discussing the Hungarian refugee intake during 1956 and is aimed for publication in an Australian journal.

Dawn Bolger is a 3rd year PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Western Sydney. Her thesis is entitled ‘Race and the Politics of Exclusion: Refugees in Australia since 1945’.

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