

Immigration Control and the Shaping of Australia's Labour Market: Conflicting Ideologies or Historical Imperatives?

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Immigration, Labour and the Construction of a Nation

Australia as we know it today has quite literally been built by immigrants. What sets the country apart from other “New World” nations, however, is that the migration process has been tightly controlled over most of the nation's history. At no stage have Australian employers been entitled to recruit freely in the international labour market. With Federation, the new Commonwealth Government became the dominant regulator in the field of immigration, giving it a pivotal part to play in shaping the development of the domestic labour force. The intensity of the government's role has endured many passing fads and fashions: early demands for a prohibition on temporary work visas; a post-war refugee crisis; latter day codification; and, periodically, deregulatory rhetoric. The most persistent feature has been the constancy of government control, profound shifts in the character of immigration regulation notwithstanding.

At all stages, Australian immigration programs have been linked intimately to labour market outcomes. Forever at the heart of government policy in this area has been the tense relationship between the importation of migrant workers, and the preservation and nurturing of the local workforce. The regulatory synergies between immigration control and the development of Australia as a working nation were most obvious in the country's early days,¹ but remain a defining aspect of the modern Australian polity. Apart from performing the basic function of determining which non-citizens have a stake in Australian firms, immigration law has been directed at the recruitment of workers from overseas to suit specific domestic labour market rationales, with contingent ramifications for the employability of local workers.

At the heart of the relationship between immigration and labour market control are two imperatives that have occasionally come into conflict

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1 See the discussion in the text below.

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