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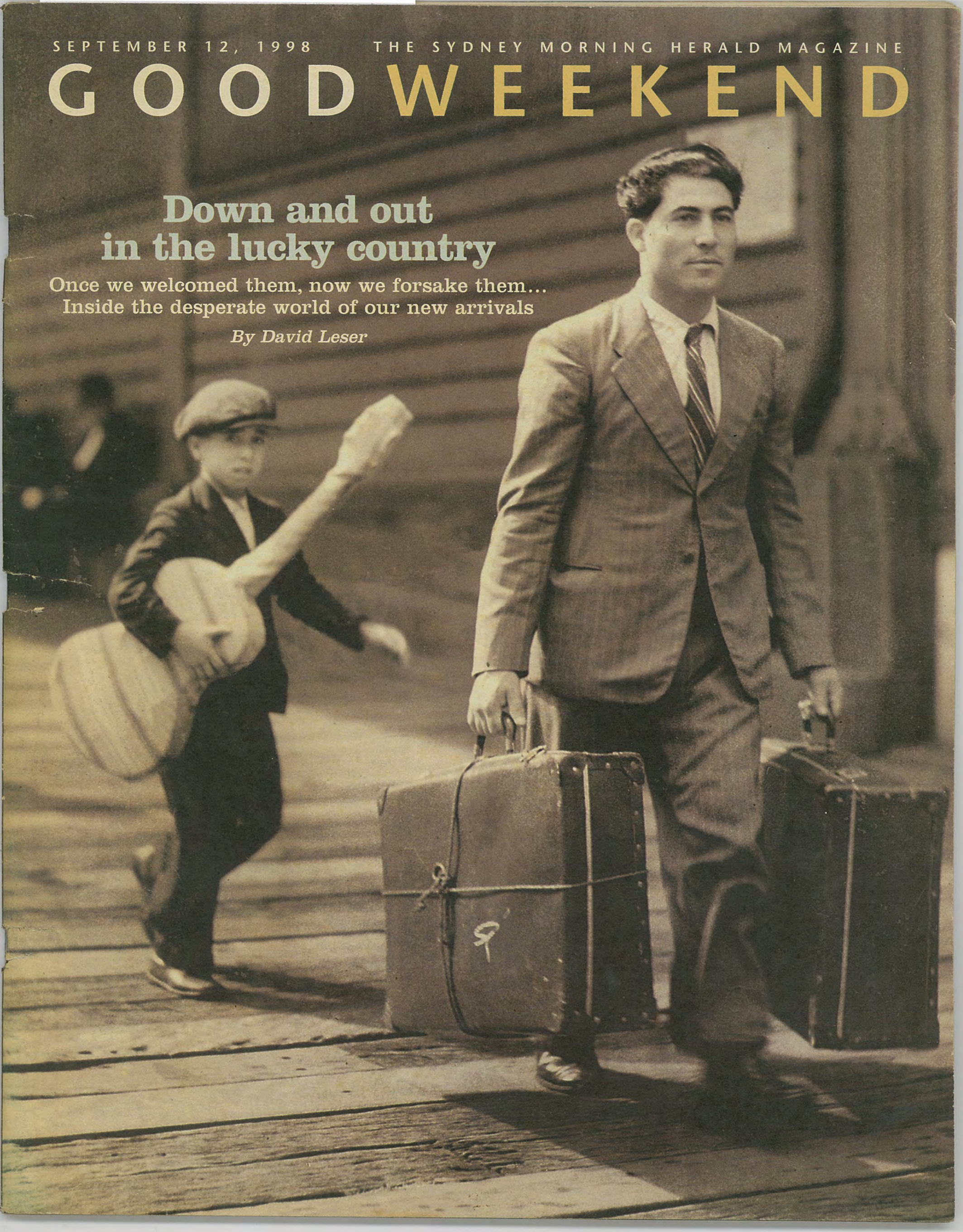
GOOD WEEKEND

Down and out in the lucky country

Once we welcomed them, now we forsake them... Inside the desperate world of our new arrivals

By David Leser



They came to us full of hope. Skilled, committed migrants, grateful for the invitation. But no-one warned them that the welcome mat had been removed and disaster lay in wait. **David Leser** uncovers a nation's shameful secret.

Welcome to Australia

THE SHAME IN TELLING THIS STORY IS not just that it is happening now, in a modern democratic state like Australia, but that there are those who are too, what? beleaguered? ignorant? indifferent? to really know or care.

Perhaps at another time, in a less pinched and poisonous moment in our history, we could be assured that in describing the woeful state of these people's lives, there would be a wave of sympathy or, at the very least, a commotion of sorts.

Trouble is, the very mention of the word "migrant" is enough to make the hearts of some freeze over. In the land of the migrant, the migrant is again on the nose. Mention that there are skilled, intelligent, hard-working, once-buoyant men and women and their children – people who were effectively invited to this country – now starving and destitute, in some cases wandering the streets, and in the mind's eye you can almost see a nation shrinking away.

Why? Because the migrant's story is not a cause célèbre in the midst of massive economic restructuring, unemployment, rural debt, youth suicide, homelessness, family breakdown and, of course, the rise of One Nation. People who are hurting often prefer the scapegoat to the truth, and who better to kick than the guy with the strange accent and the unpronounceable name?

That's one reason the Haque family packed their bags and left Australia earlier this year, three months after arriving in their new home.

Azar Haque (not his real name) had been a successful architect and his wife, Sabera, an accountant before they touched Australian soil with their four children in October 1997. The family had lived in Pakistan as refugees since 1979 after fleeing their native Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet invasion. On the strength of their professional qualifications and English skills, and after passing a strict points test, Australia accepted them as independent, skilled migrants, members of the most valued category in the country's immigration program.

Within weeks of arriving, they knew they were in serious trouble. The $2,000 they had entered the country with was fast dwindling. On the available evidence, it appears the Australian High Commission in Islamabad never warned them that this amount – large by Pakistani standards – was insufficient for a family in Australia for anything other than the short term. Nor did any Australian official tell them about the difficulty in obtaining jobs or, crucially, the two-year waiting period for income support for new arrivals.

Suddenly, they found themselves without a place to live, with no form of social security, no jobs and not even transport concessions to look for work. They applied for public housing, but were ruled ineligible because they didn't have a source of income. They then tried to get an affordable two-bedroom unit, but were refused by real-estate agents on the grounds that there were too many people seeking too few rooms.

"It was a disastrous situation," says the community advocate who worked on the case and who requested anonymity. "The family had to split up. They began living off donations from friends and charities like the Salvation Army. The husband went to live with one friend, two of the children went to live with another and the wife and other two children went to a third place.

"Because of this, the husband sank into deep depression. He couldn't sleep and lost his whole sense of self-worth. He said, 'I can't even create a home where I can live with my children.' "

By January this year, the Haques were so shattered by their experience, they pawned a set of traditional ornaments they'd been keeping for their daughters' weddings, bought six airline tickets and returned to the Indian subcontinent. They felt they could survive better in third-world Pakistan than in first-world Australia.

THIS HAS BEEN AN ALMOST SILENT REVOLUTION. No grand, prime-time statements about an overhaul in immigration policy; no public pronouncements that the welcome mat was being removed. Rather, a series of quiet and ruthless measures carried out by the Department of Social Security (DSS) in the context of government budget cutbacks and a rethink on immigration policy.

It began in the early 1990s when the department identified an estimated $600 million that could purportedly be saved by withholding unemployment benefits to mainly newly arrived migrants. In 1993, the Keating Government responded to this assessment by imposing a six-month waiting period on a number of social security benefits for new arrivals.

Four years later, the Howard Government went much further. On March 4, 1997 the Government fulfilled an election promise by extending this waiting period to two years. They also extended the range of benefits to be withheld. This meant that, with the exception of those who'd entered Australia under the humanitarian or refugee program, all new migrants were ineligible for two years for income support, including, crucially, the Special Benefit.

Until then, the Special Benefit had been regarded as the final safety net in Australia's social security system, the payment of "last resort" to someone in desperate straits. Under the Keating changes, the Special Benefit had still been available to someone who could prove he or she was destitute. Now, under the new legislation, new arrivals could only draw this "last resort" payment if they could show they'd suffered a "substantial change of circumstances beyond their control".

That was then, this is now: European immigrants arriving here in the 1960s (opposite) may have been faced with racism, but the new wave of migrants of the 1980s and '90s (above) had to confront a much broader backlash.

DAVID MOORE/WILDLIGHT

While the Labor Party has pledged to review the Government's policies should it be elected, it has not committed itself to scrapping the legislation.

Meanwhile, the Federal Minister for Social Security, Senator Jocelyn Newman, defends the legislative changes on the grounds that they closed off a loophole left by the previous government. This allowed people denied forms of income support "by the front door" to access the Special Benefit "by the back door". "Besides," she says, "people can still get Medicare, the family allowance as well as the Special Benefit in certain circumstances."

But as events have proved, the changes have been almost Kafkaesque in their implications, particularly for migrants from third-world countries who had applied to come here before the legislative changes came into effect. What constitutes a "substantial change of circumstances"? What is "beyond a person's control"?

Many, it would appear, applied to come to Australia under one set of rules only to find another set operating once they got here. Despite the Government's insistence that people were warned of the changes to the rules, anecdotal evidence from welfare groups suggests otherwise.

Families have ended up selling almost everything they owned to pay for visa applications, medical certificates, English tuition and airfares only to find they had insufficient funds when they arrived. Some were completely unaware of the cost of living in Australia because of often patchy and inconsistent advice coming from Australian high commissions and embassies.

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"Many people don't understand what will happen when they get here," says welfare rights lawyer Meena Sripathy. "A lot of people, particularly in the south Asia region, view Australia as the land of opportunity. They have anecdotal information that if you are down and out, there is help for you because it is a wealthy, industrialised nation. They certainly have no idea they'll be left starving."

But what to do? Abandon plans, forgo the money already spent and start all over again at home, or take the chance in their adoptive country? Many have obviously chosen the latter, but without a job or social security they've found themselves living hand-to-mouth, unable to return home, unable to get started here. All that has been left to them is a lengthy appeals process in which they are forced to prove they have suffered a "substantial change of circumstances".

Although at the time it was introduced the legislation was bitterly opposed by welfare groups and the opposition parties as being harsh and discriminatory – as well as in possible breach of United Nations conventions – it is only now that its devastating impact on families can be properly assessed.

Charities and welfare organisations have told GOOD WEEKEND of heart-rending cases of newly arrived skilled migrants and their children suffering from malnutrition and mental disorders as a result of the legislation. Families, like the Haques, have split up or asked other people to look after their children. Parents have been left without sufficient money to buy food or acquire proper accommodation. Some children have been reduced to living on a near-starvation diet.

In one case, an Indian couple's young son broke his arm in the playground after being taunted by fellow students. He then contracted chickenpox. The child was subsequently admitted to hospital on a number of occasions, not because of his broken arm or chickenpox, but rather because doctors feared he was so undernourished his bones would not mend.

Adult migrant teachers and counsellors have contacted welfare groups, alarmed that students were dropping out of courses because they had no funds to catch buses. Other students were becoming disorientated and lethargic in class, warning signs of undernourishment and depression.

With few exceptions, these people have refused to go public for fear their plight will only worsen. Those who have been prepared to tell their stories – either directly to GOOD WEEKEND or through community groups representing them – have asked that their names, occupations and, in most cases, countries of origin be changed. All of them are vulnerable in the extreme and deeply ashamed of the circumstances they now find themselves in.

Aziz Khan, for instance, was a highly qualified agricultural scientist who arrived in Melbourne nine months ago with his teenage son, Nusrat, from Bangladesh. Before coming here, he had no history of mental illness. Today, he sees a psychiatrist regularly and, until a few weeks ago, was considering taking his own life.

Welfare authorities were only alerted to the Khans' predicament when 14-year-old Nusrat decided to call the Red Cross because of his father's worsening mental and physical state.

AZIZ KHAN HAD ARRIVED IN THE COUNTRY late last year fully expecting to find work within weeks. (Again, no-one in Australian immigration appears to have suggested this was an unrealistic expectation.) When a job didn't eventuate and when the relationship with the cousin who'd sponsored him to Australia broke down, Khan found himself in quicksand.

He applied to Centrelink (the agency that administers payments on behalf of the DSS) for a Special Benefit of just under $175 a week, but was judged not to have suffered a "substantial change of circumstances beyond his control". His only means of income became the family allowance – $124 a week, which he was entitled to because of his son. This was exactly $4 more than his rent.

The community worker who attended his case was extremely distressed by what she found. "When they called us, they were living in a flat, sleeping on the floor and using shirts for pillows," she says. "They had no table, no blankets, no beds, no jumpers, no TV, nothing. I asked him how he was coping. He said, 'I only eat once a day.' I said, 'What are you eating?' He said, 'Bread.'

"I then said, 'What are you doing about fruit and vegetables?' He said, 'Nothing.' I said, 'What will you do when you get an electricity bill?' He said, 'I don't know.' I then asked him what was happening with his son at school. He told me that his friends were giving him food."

Aziz Khan considered sending his son back to Bangladesh, but couldn't bear to be separated from him. He kept applying for jobs, but met with continual rejections. His physical and mental condition continued to deteriorate. He then wrote a suicide note to his son – which is what prompted the boy to contact the Red Cross.

At a welfare officer's urging, Aziz Khan eventually went to see a psychologist. This is in part what the psychologist's report had to say: "[Aziz Khan] has no income and is depending on friends for help. His physical problems are due to poor nutrition. His depression and malnutrition are affecting his chances of employment ... His son appears traumatised and malnourished. The client said his objective was to get a job when he arrived. Now his objective is merely to survive. The father and son have been living on popcorn, bread and onions for months."

It was on the basis of Aziz Khan's physical and psychological collapse that Centrelink finally agreed to grant him a Special Benefit, proof, according to the legislation's critics, of the perversity of the system. "The further a person's health deteriorates, the more likely that person will be successful in getting income support," says lawyer Meena Sripathy. "Yet the sicker he becomes, the harder it becomes for him to secure employment."

"When he arrived, his objective was to get a job. Now it is merely to survive. Father and son have been living on popcorn, bread and onions for months."

Senator Jocelyn Newman says she is not indifferent to the plight of people like Aziz Khan. "Of course I am sympathetic, as one human being to another," she says. "But I am also charged with administering government policy and people coming to a new country should come prepared to support themselves. It is not fair that they come and expect to get help immediately – unless their circumstances change substantially."

But Senator Andrew Bartlett, the Australian Democrats' immigration spokesman, is appalled by the legislation and has sought, unsuccessfully, to amend the Act. "It's hard to believe that this could be happening," he says. "It is outrageous that one group of people has less rights than others. And the small amount of money [between $20 million and $30 million] that will be saved by having people starve is astonishing.

"I think it shows that the Prime Minister and his Government are quite willing to have legitimate members of our community live in absolute poverty and say it is their own fault. They say, 'They should have thought about all this before they came here.' It sends out a terrible message, one which reinforces the view that some people are keen to promote – that migrants are a drain on the community."

In fact, migrant and welfare groups claim it makes much more economic sense to give new

migrants a leg-up in the beginning rather than see their physical and mental condition deteriorate to such a point that the taxpayer is then forced to pay for either their rehabilitation, legal redress or both.

Firoza Sultana, from Bangladesh, an international expert on diarrhoeal disease, told GOOD WEEKEND there was no way she and her family would have ever been able to establish themselves here without some initial form of income support.

The family arrived in 1992 and, after seven months on social security, Sultana found employment as a migrant community worker. "We would have returned to Bangladesh straight away without income support," she says. "It would have been just too difficult to live."

IMMIGRATION IS ONE OF THE MOST FRAUGHT and complex issues today in Australian public life. It is the hard political reality that both defines and divides us; the rock upon which we are built and the rock upon which some believe we might yet founder.

In its broadest sense, it embraces everything – our land, our history, our politics, our prejudices, our myths, our sense of ourselves. It pits old, white Australia against new, culturally diverse Australia, the bush against the city, the socially

ignored against the socially mobile, the fearful against the welcoming. It challenges us at every level, from the environmental, economic and political to the social, cultural and moral.

For a nation of migrants, it has to be said that there has always been a remarkable ambivalence about those who've migrated here, even though only one in 100 Australians could have ever laid claim to local ancestry before 1788.

The migrant was always the tyke, reffo, wog, dago, Eytie, yid, Chink or slope long before he or she was ever one of "us". Part of the reason for this was natural irreverence, embarrassment, fear or just plain bigotry towards foreigners. Part of it was also that deep in the national psyche was lodged the core myth that we were essentially a superior, white, homogeneous, English-speaking, intellectually British country.

To that end, we passed an anti-Chinese immigration Act, issued dictation tests (a device used to exclude non-European migrants), expelled Kanakas from the sugar plantations (having press-ganged them here in the first place) and, in 1901, united around the Immigration Restriction Act, the legislative foundation of the White Australia policy. (The policy survived until formally abolished by the Whitlam Government in 1973.)

It is the reason Jock Collins, associate professor of economics at the University of Technology, Sydney, describes the Australian immigration story as one "inextricably linked with racist laws and practices". The basis of Australian immigration for more than 100 years, he wrote in his book *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land: Australia's Post-war Immigration*, was "White Australia".

But the White Australia policy also produced a kind of paradox. It allowed us, for example, to refuse entry to Filipinos for two decades after 1945 – a policy that earned us unfavourable comparisons with Nazi Germany at the United Nations – while at the same time allowing us to turn Turks into "honorary Europeans" so as to meet Australia's need for labour.

And there's the rub. In the post-war years, Australia was expanding rapidly, particularly in the manufacturing and building industries. The natural population growth rate was estimated to be 1 per cent a year, while the government's stated objective was 2 per cent. Immigration was, therefore, indispensable to the country fulfilling its promise of industrial expansion.

But even with full employment and a booming economy, the union movement was concerned about the arrival of foreigners. Arthur Calwell, the post-war immigration minister, tried to assuage fears by guaranteeing workers their jobs, by appealing to the nation's sense of vulnerability to invasion – "populate or perish" was the famous catchcry – and by assuring the country that it would remain racially homogeneous. "For every foreign migrant, there will be 10 from the United Kingdom," he once famously said.

The migrant was always the tyke, reffo, wog, dago, Eytie, yid, Chink or slope long before he or she was ever one of "us".

The problem was that, despite the inducements of the "£10 ticket", there were not enough British migrants. Australia was reluctantly forced to cast the net wider, initially towards Eastern Europe and the camps full of mainly Baltic refugees, but then in subsequent decades to northern Europe, southern Europe and the Middle East.

The result, as Jock Collins puts it, was that "a policy which had initially been planned to continue a homogeneous and racially pure society by default ended up producing one of the most ethnically diverse of all immigration programs, with migrants from over 100 nationalities and ethnic groups making the long journey to Australia".

This contradiction imposed its own warped pragmatism, one which rears its head to this day. As Collins noted, "a two-class immigration program was introduced [whereby] British, and later other migrants from English-speaking countries, were to be treated in a manner similar to the Australian-born, while those from non-English-speaking countries were to occupy inferior positions in the labour market and in Australian society in general".

These non-English-speaking migrants were, in the words of Professor James Jupp, director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the Australian National University, "pitchforked into manual labour, dumped in outback concentration camps and regarded as foreigners and cheap labour".

THERE IS, OF COURSE, ANOTHER SIDE TO THE immigration story that does Australia proud. It is a photo album filled with images of heroism, ingenuity, resilience and tolerance. If you thumb through the pages, you will see pictures of old suitcases in new canefields, Chinese laundries and restaurants, Greek milkbars, Vietnamese bakeries, Croatian vineyards, Jewish delicatessens, Italian corner shops, Ghanaian musical bands, Lebanese mosques, Sikh banana plantations, Indian temples and citizenship ceremonies in their thousands.

You will see a society transformed more dramatically – and more peaceably – over 50 years than any other society on earth. What isn't so obvious is the economic contribution that these people and their children have made and, arguably, continue to make. And this is one of the most contentious questions of all – what is the impact of migration on the economy, especially during times of unemployment?

In 1995, Jock Collins co-authored a book called *A Shop Full of Dreams* about ethnic small businesses in Australia. It showed that one-quarter of our small businesses were non-English-speaking and that their contribution to the nation's wealth and job creation has been enormous. "A lot of these ethnic businesses were creating employment and 20 per cent of them were engaged in international trade," he says. "They were responsible for current account deficit reduction."

Collins' findings are confirmed by new research from the Australian National University's Centre for Economic Policy, which reveals that prospects for the unemployed have been boosted in the past 20 years by immigration. In short, Australia's cultural diversity has been one of its biggest economic advantages. Except that cultural diversity hasn't always sat well with sections of the community. "All the opinion polls [of the '50s and '60s] said that we didn't want to become Italianised, Greekised or Europeanised," says Collins. "If the government had followed public opinion, we'd still be an Anglo-Saxon country."

What emerged, instead, was a bipartisan policy on immigration which initially discriminated in favour of Europeans and then, from 1973 onwards, removed all vestiges of White Australia. It was to be a policy based on "the avoidance of discrimination on any grounds of colour of skin or nationality".

That policy led in 1986-87 to Asia (including the Middle East) becoming, for the first time since the gold rush, the largest source of migration to Australia – with 36 per cent of new settlers. If maintained, that will see the number of Asian-born men and women comprising about 7 per cent of the population by the year 2025.

Ian Macphee, the Fraser Government's immigration minister between 1979 and 1982, says the reason the migration program shifted in the mid-1970s was to take into account the new-found prosperity in Europe (fewer Europeans wanted to come to Australia) and the demand from regions such as the Middle East and Asia, particularly with the end of the Vietnam War.

"It was a conscious bipartisan policy pursued by Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Keating to broaden our skills base," says Macphee. "We needed migrants from our principal economic region [Asia/Pacific] because they added language skills and cultural assets which our businesses needed to succeed in the region."

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That bipartisanship ended, Macphee says, in 1988 when John Howard, as opposition leader, voiced his concerns about the rate of Asian immigration. Those remarks were to prove ruinous to his leadership a year later. Many of those who were to help stage the coup against him in 1989 did not believe Asian immigration to be too high and bitterly resented him for saying so.

Furthermore, as Paul Kelly, author of *The End of Certainty*, a book analysing 1980s politics, noted: "By raising the Asian immigration issue, Howard effectively launched a new debate. He abandoned the FitzGerald position ... by introducing a racial component."

In June 1988, Dr Stephen FitzGerald, a former ambassador to China, had shocked the Hawke Government with his three-volume report on Australia's immigration program. The report argued that community confidence in immigration had eroded because it was no longer seen as being in the national interest. But the real problem, FitzGerald wrote, was not opposition to Asian migrants – his polling had found strong support for the principle of non-discrimination – but, rather, opposition to the immigration program as a whole.

Ten years later, this same discontent appears to be alive and well. It is a theme Paul Sheehan has hammered in his best-selling book *Among the Barbarians*. He argues that Australians are sick of being patronised about immigration and told it's a good thing. Honest debate, he insists, has been stymied for too long.

And yet according to Ian Macphee, the discussion that Sheehan and FitzGerald claim has been absent from Australia – a claim often endorsed by John Howard – in fact raged throughout the '80s in the form of national and regional newspaper stories, public speeches, parliamentary debate and on talk-back radio.

David Marr echoed this in a recent profile of John Howard in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. "The truth is," he wrote, "the issue of race – immigrant and Aboriginal – has hardly ever been off the political agenda."

Says Macphee: "There was never any political correctness about immigration. What there was was an agreement about what our needs were and how they fluctuated according to domestic and international trends in the economy. I cannot understand how Howard was not conscious of this policy all the way through [the Fraser years]. He was treasurer and he understood the benefits of moving to a more global economy. He wanted to disband tariff protection and would have had to understand that with the freer flow of capital there would have to be a freer flow of labour [from the Asian region]."

"It is very difficult talking about this ... If anyone thinks people like me want to go to social security, they are wrong. The majority of us don't want to demean ourselves."

TO SEE HOW FAR A MAN CAN FALL, YOU COULD do worse than visit the "home" of Tilan Perera, two floors up a smog-stained, twin-tower block overlooking Sydney's Great Western Highway. The scene is one of grinding poverty: a donated mattress, wardrobe, table and chairs from the Salvation Army; a near-empty fridge and a six-pack of Coca-Cola which the host has bought in honour of his visitor.

Perera arrived in Australia from Sri Lanka with his wife at the beginning of this year, armed with a post-graduate degree from the US, fluency in English, a previous successful job in Europe with an economic think-tank, impeccable qualifications as a former senior economics researcher and, finally, a boundless desire to succeed.

In Sri Lanka, Perera had been more than modestly comfortable. He owned his own house and a car. He held down an influential position in the higher reaches of the bureaucracy. He was a member of the elite – distinguished, respected, highly informed and, compared with many of his countrymen and women, well paid. But he was intellectually dissatisfied and hungry for new opportunities. He was, in short, someone who might have been regarded as the ideal migrant.

He'd considered migrating to New Zealand, America or Germany, but chose Australia on the basis of his many dealings with key Australian officials in Sri Lanka. "I felt this was a country with a lot of tolerance and acceptance and support for a skilled migrant starting up a new life," he says.

Perera applied to migrate in 1995. The application fee cost him the equivalent of eight months' wages for an unskilled Sri Lankan worker. By the time he'd paid for medical examinations for himself and his wife, he'd spent the equivalent of $5,000 – nearly half his life's savings. He arrived in the country with $4,000 – an amount he thought ample for the brief period he would be looking for work.

Perera admits now he should have sought clarification on the letter he received from the Australian High Commission in Colombo informing him that he'd been accepted as an independent skilled migrant, but alerting him to the legislative changes that had been put in place since March 1997. "It was all technical jargon and very alien to me," he says. "It said some things were available

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in certain circumstances and other things weren't. I should have thought about this more but we were excited about being accepted."

What was uppermost in Perera's mind was that Australia had a history of migration from Sri Lanka; it was a country now offering him a place to live and, judging by the job vacancies advertised in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (copies of which he'd obtained in Colombo), he would have no trouble finding work.

What followed is now a familiar scenario. Between the two of them, Perera and his wife applied unsuccessfully for hundreds of jobs. (His wife had worked in Sri Lanka as a bookkeeper.) The elderly Sri Lankan couple they'd been staying with asked them to leave the house. The money began to run out.

Tilan Perera begins to cry as he recounts what happened next. "It is very difficult talking about this," he says. "If anyone thinks people like me want to go to social security, they are wrong. The majority of us don't want to demean ourselves.

"But we began to have very limited money. A lot of the people whom I thought could help were not in a position to help. Some friends even started to avoid us, people who used to respect me in Sri Lanka. We gradually became more insular and this was very badly reflected on the wife. She started getting depressed and developing a heart condition and high blood pressure. I dragged her here. We had a much better life in Sri Lanka. We were never like this. Never dependent on charities."

By the time Perera and his wife came to the Welfare Rights Centre in Sydney, it had been three months since their arrival here. They were down to their last $200, both "half-starved" and terrified. Much to his embarrassment, Perera applied for a Special Benefit, but was denied on the basis that he had not suffered a "substantial change in circumstances".

Their situation horrified Linda Forbes, of the centre. "It was awful that a person with so much to offer Australia could be reduced to this," she says. "If he'd been given some assistance to settle soon after arrival, they wouldn't have reached those depths. But to force people into a situation where they are so absolutely desperate is just so counterproductive.

"No matter how talented and enthusiastic a person is when coming to Australia, there is no way that, when facing all this material and emotional hardship and distress, he can then apply himself to getting work."

MULTICULTURALISM, THAT MUCH REVILED AND misunderstood term, was conceived in many respects as a policy designed to help people like Tilan Perera. It was an attempt to address past wrongs, to include non-English-speaking migrants in a culturally pluralistic society, to prevent them becoming "non-people".

Indeed it was the Fraser Government in which John Howard was treasurer that, through its landmark Galbally Report in 1978, advanced a wide-ranging affirmative-action package of programs and services. This acknowledged not only that migrants had special needs, but that Australia's social cohesion was enhanced by helping them settle.

It is clear now, according to Professor Jock Collins and others, that this policy has been ditched. "It is phenomenal that after five decades of immigration, we are throwing out the idea of equality for all," Collins says. "The most difficult years of settlement are the first two years. It's the time of greatest need and yet this is the time the Government pulls the rug out. It's a very shortsighted view of the economic contribution these people will make, but it is also a very black-hearted move that shows no compassion or understanding of the migration process."

Since coming to office in 1996, the Howard Government has responded to perceived community concern about immigration. A fortnight ago, it banned skilled migrants over the age of 45 from coming to the country. It has also tackled the problem of fraudulent marriages of convenience and radically reformed the family reunion component – limiting access to welfare benefits for recently arrived family members and imposing tougher restrictions on eligibility. According to Bob Birrell, head of Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research, this makes Australia's policies on family reunion "more in accord with the restrictive patterns evident in Western European nations than with those of Canada and the US, the 'settler' societies which Australia's migration program used to parallel".

This year, Australia will allow 30,500 family members into the country, 26,000 fewer than the corresponding period three years ago. By contrast, 35,000 skilled migrants have been given the green light to migrate, 11,000 more than in 1995-96. These are the people Australia says it wants most.

How we treat them is, therefore, a mark of our decency. By all means, according to the Democrats' Senator Andrew Bartlett, let's have an immigration debate. Let's look at the carrying capacity of the land, the needs of the labour market, the fact that our fertility rate is declining and our population ageing; or look at whether environmental damage is more about population size or the way we live. Let's develop, as Stephen FitzGerald insists we should, a long-term population policy where we discuss the role of immigration and a migrant's obligations to this country.

"But that is really a separate debate," Bartlett says. "This debate is about people who have already been encouraged to come here. This is about us saying, 'Yes, you can come to our country' and then denying them the same rights as anyone else to get assistance if things go wrong. In that sense, it doesn't matter how many we are letting in – 200,000, 2,000 or two." ■

POSTSCRIPT: *Tilan Perera has now got a job working as an economics researcher while his wife, Marguerite, has managed to secure a low-paid menial job. They no longer depend on food vouchers and help from charities, but they remain emotionally scarred by their experience. Marguerite has stopped staring at the wall for hours on end, but is still seeing a doctor for depression. Tilan Perera believes they might have turned the corner. He just can't understand why Australia accepted them – and then, in their hour of need, turned its back.*

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Terms and Conditions: 1. Cash back is limited to the purchase of Philips PL Slimline, SL Comfort, SL Prismatic, SL Decor. 2. One cash back for each globe purchased. Limit of 5 cash backs per household. A cheque for cash backs claimed will be posted to each applicant. 3. Product barcode must be attached to the cash back coupon. 4. Promotion runs 25th July, 1998 to 30th November, 1998. Philips Lighting accepts no responsibility for late, lost or misdirected mail. 5. Promoters and associates, agencies and their families are ineligible to enter. 6. The promoter is Philips Lighting, a division of Philips Electronics Australia Ltd (ACN 008 445 743), 34 Waterloo Road, North Ryde NSW 2113. 7. For more information please call Philips Lighting on 13 14 01. PLL0150/SMH.

Unlike normal light globes, Philips Energy Savers are designed to produce the same amount of light for a lot less energy. What's more, Energy Savers only use around 20% of the power of ordinary light globes, which results in lower energy consumption and less greenhouse gas emissions.
Philips Energy Savers will directly replace your normal household globes and better still, last up to 8 times longer. And if you send in the coupon with the barcode from any Philips Energy Saver, you'll receive $5 cash back.
Save on your power bill, save the environment and save $5.

PHILIPS
Let's make things better.