

The International Consequences of American National Origins Quotas: The Australian Case

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This article examines Australian responses to the imposition of stringent national origins quotas in the United States during the 1920s. Following the introduction of the American quota system, many Australians worried that large numbers of undesirable southern and eastern European migrants would make their way toward Australian ports. Widespread calls for preemptive restrictions forced the Australian government to finally implement a range of measures designed to limit immigration from Italy, Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, and Malta. More broadly, this article argues that American quotas often inadvertently engendered a wide range of indirect and unintentional consequences around the world that scholars of migration and American foreign relations might explore in greater depth. It concludes by suggesting some opportunities for individual and collaborative research into the international effects of the United States' notorious national origins quota system.

On 13 May 1924, Italian prime minister Benito Mussolini convened the first International Conference on Immigration and Emigration in Rome. Convoled under the auspices of the International Labor Organization – and attended by delegates from fifty-eight countries – this unprecedented gathering represented an attempt to manage the intensifying global trend toward immigration restriction. Most significantly, the conference began just ten days before President Calvin Coolidge signed legislation that tightened already strict national origins quotas in the United States. The impending retrenchment of American immigration limits augured particular cause for concern, given that country's reception of millions of European migrants in the years before the First World War.¹ The practical closure of American borders to southern and eastern Europeans would invariably dislocate existing circuits of transatlantic migration, staunching the most traversed transatlantic networks while potentially engendering new pathways elsewhere. As a *New York Times* editorial observed as the meeting got under way in Italy,

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¹ "A World Problem at the Capitol," *The Times*, 16 May 1924, 15; "Conference Opens on Immigration," *New York Times*, 16 May 1924, 2.