

The White Australia Policy, the British Empire, and the World

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In an editorial published during the Australian Commonwealth's first federal election in March 1901, the *Sydney Morning Herald* expressed support for the legislative exclusion of Chinese, 'Hindoos', and 'men of other Eastern races' from the new dominion. Preventing large-scale Asian immigration constituted one of federation's prime motivations, after all, and inaction augured only misery and ruin. 'The experience of all countries shows the danger of unrestricted coloured immigration', the *Herald's* editorialists opined, 'and if we are to have "a white Australia", the Federal Parliament must devote its attention to the matter at an early stage'.¹ At the same time, however, the *Herald* editorialists also recognised the complex imperial and international sensitivities inherent in Australian attempts to explicitly restrict Asian immigration. The key point, expressed in a June 1901 editorial, was that 'while we remain integral parts of the Empire we cannot expect to be able to legislate freely against our fellow subjects or the subjects of powerful and sensitive states'.² The reference to 'fellow subjects' signified South Asians from the Indian subcontinent, while the 'subjects of

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1 'Undesirable Immigrants', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March, 1901, p. 6.

2 'Coloured Labour', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June, 1901, p. 4.