

Maya Pilbrow

*I care deeply about Australia's involvement in U.S.-led wars. I think Australia's immigration system is strongly tied to our foreign policy, all of which is overtly hawkish and ultimately detrimental to building a more peaceful society.*

### **What's the difference between the U.S. and Australia? Turns out, not much.**

All things considered, it really was a matter of circumstance that I was born in the U.S. Neither of my parents were. They arrived as students in 1989, my mother from India and my father from Australia. For 17 years, they lived in the U.S., moving from temporary visa to temporary visa, dependent on their ability to find work in their respective fields.

It was during this time that my sister and I were born, on American soil. By virtue of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, we were both granted citizenship as our [birthright](#). We gained Australian citizenship through my father, as did my mother when we eventually moved to this country.

I'm incredibly lucky to have dual citizenship. I can vote in two countries, I can travel to many places in the world without needing a visa, and I have the right to live and work in two of the most [desirable](#) destination countries for potential migrants.

What is most important to recognise, though, is that I have done nothing to merit these opportunities, other than be born in the right place, at the right time, to the right people. While I personally have benefitted from the immigration and naturalisation policies of the U.S. and Australia, I'm aware that my story is far from commonplace.

In fact, people like me, who are able to move throughout the world uninhibited by visas, documents, or detention centres, are very much in the global minority. The history of migration to the U.S. and Australia is not the story of jetsetters with multiple passports, but instead is fraught with human rights violations, incarceration, and legalised discrimination.

A cursory glance at these two countries reveals many similarities. Both the US and Australia are majority white anglophone countries with long histories of European colonisation and migration. Both nations were founded on stolen land, and both nations have yet to come to terms with their bloody foundation in any meaningful way.

Of course, there are differences between the two. Australia is still part of the Commonwealth, while the US fought for independence from Britain. But culturally, ethnically, and socially, there are many ties that bind between Australia and the United States. How else could one explain the astonishing parallels between early exclusionary immigration policies in both countries?

Starting with the Immigration Restriction [Act](#) of 1901, Australia's migration system operated under a series of acts and statutes known collectively as the White Australia policy. Racially discriminatory immigration selection criteria were not outlawed until the [passage](#) of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975. The White Australia policy restricted the migration of non-European settlers and labourers, in particular those from Asia and the Pacific, and curtailed the rights of non-European workers who were already in the country.

During this time in the United States, the Chinese Exclusion [Act](#) of 1882 was enforced, which brought migration from China to a standstill until the act's eventual repeal in 1943. Discrimination on the basis of race and national origin continued until the [passage](#) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

There are differences in these cases. Australia's 1901 Immigration Restriction Act relied not on overt race-based criteria, as did the Chinese Exclusion Act, but on a purposefully [difficult](#) dictation test designed to screen out non-European migrants. But there are contextual similarities between the two.

In both the US and Australia, racially discriminatory immigration laws were supported wholeheartedly by the majority of the labour force. Contemporaneous accounts [reflect](#) anti-Chinese sentiment inextricably wound up with worries about the scarcity of work in the US, while the White Australia Policy was [supported](#) by trade unions from the very start.

So, we can see that Australia and the US may have had similar immigration systems in the early decades of the twentieth century, but it wasn't until the Second World War that the two nations began to develop the robust relationship that we can still see today.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 turned the Pacific into a new theatre of war, one in which Australia was particularly vulnerable. Australia had already sent most of its own armed forces to Europe to aid the United Kingdom and was woefully underprepared for the potential of a Japanese attack on Australian shores.

In light of this dire situation, then-Prime Minister John Curtin, in his national New Year's [address](#), stated "Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom."

The fear that the United Kingdom could not provide adequate military protection and security for Australia was proven somewhat correct a few months later, during the [fall of Singapore](#) which saw the British colony overtaken by Japanese forces, resulting in the capture of more than 15,000 Australian soldiers.

Within a few months of Battle of Singapore, US soldiers [arrived](#) on Australian shores. And they never really left. Australia became a major base of operations in the Pacific for the remainder of the Second World War, but the US-Australian relationship carried on long after the war was over. Fears of a Japanese resurgence, as well as spiking Cold War tensions after the Chinese Communist Revolution, caused Australia and New Zealand to rely more strongly on the US for security.

This led to the signing of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, or ANZUS, in 1951. This alliance between the three countries is coming up on its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, having been invoked only [once](#) in 2001, by Australia in supporting the invasion of Afghanistan. Other wars – in Korea, in Vietnam, in Kuwait, in Iraq – have not required invocation of the treaty. We've simply been happy to go along with the US.

And what have been the consequences of our actions? Destabilisation of huge regions of the globe, mass migration, refugee [crises](#). Australia might not be wholly responsible, but we certainly played our part. Back on home shores, though, we like to pretend otherwise, taking an "out of sight, out of mind" approach to our responsibility to those displaced by our own involvement in various wars.

The story of Australia's famously restrictive immigration detention system starts with the Vietnam War. Our country sent [60,000](#) troops to Vietnam to fight on behalf of the U.S. In the mid-1970s, Vietnamese refugees, fleeing the violence in their homeland, began [arriving](#) on Australian shores.

Over the next two decades, more waves of asylum seekers arrived via boat. Many people were detained, but detention was still a discretionary, rather than mandatory, measure. This changed

when the Keating government passed the Migration Reform Act 1992, which [called](#) for the mandatory detention of all unlawful non-citizens.

Initially introduced as an interim measure, this policy of mandatory detention has proven politically popular with both major parties, and has continued uninterrupted, much to the chagrin of [human rights](#) activists the world over.

This harsh system of immigration detention arguably owes much to the U.S. policy of interdiction directed at Haitian refugees during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1981, the Reagan administration [began](#) to stop, search, and turn back boats carrying Haitians fleeing the Duvalier dictatorship. A decade later, the numbers of Haitians trying to flee the country increased dramatically following the 1991 coup that [overthrew](#) President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The number of at-sea interdictions grew at a commensurate rate. The U.S. began relying on offshore processing, and in 1996, mirroring Australia's earlier actions, [enacted](#) the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which mandated detention for undocumented immigrants.

The passage of the IIRIRA has led to detention being the deterrent of choice in trying to discourage migration to the U.S. This in turn has caused widespread criticism of mandatory detention as a [violation](#) of internationally recognised standards relating to human rights.

So where do we go from here? Both [Australia](#) and the [U.S.](#) seem more determined than ever to continue these punitive immigration policies, despite widespread condemnation. For decades, these two countries have essentially been in lockstep when it comes to questions of immigration and national security, using scaremongering about the latter in order to restrict the former.

What will it take to break this cycle? Given the long history of discriminatory immigration policies, dating back centuries, and Australia's close allyship with the U.S., systemic change seems both necessary and daunting. The rot may go deep, but that's all the more reason to tear out the old foundations and rebuild.