

Margaret George Award paper

Mrs O’Keefe and the battle for White Australia

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Despite its importance to Australian national life during the 72 years of its legislative existence and beyond, the White Australia Policy remains a relatively under-examined aspect of Australian history.

The extant historiography of the policy has focused on three major themes. The first and the oldest theme is the genesis of the White Australia Policy in the 19th century. Contributions to this area date back to Myra Willard’s study in the early 1920s but the most important contributions came in the 1970s through the work of Charles Price and Andrew Markus.¹

From the late 1980s my own work opened a second area of inquiry – the factors explaining the decline of the policy. Important contributions to this aspect of the policy’s history by academics such as Nancy Viviani, Neville Meaney and Gwenda Tavan followed.² These contributions have tended to focus on the postwar era (especially the 1950s and 1960s) but some historians have since looked past the immediate causes of the policy’s decline to examine earlier examples of opposition and resistance to the policy (see, for example, David Walker’s work on the New South

¹ See Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1923; Charles Price, *The Great White Walls are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836–1888*, Australian Institute of International Affairs in association with Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974; and Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850–1901*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1979.

² See Sean Brawley, ‘The old and New Guard – a factor in the liberalisation of Australia’s restrictive immigration policy’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1989; Sean Brawley, ‘Long hairs and “ratbags”: The ALP and the abolition of the White Australia Policy’, in Gough Whitlam et al (ed.), *A Century of Social Change: Labor History Essays*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1992; Sean Brawley, ‘The Department of Immigration and abolition of the “White Australia Policy” reflected through the private diaries of Sir Peter Heydon’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1993; Nancy Viviani, *The Abolition of the White Australia Policy: The Immigration Reform Movement Revisited*, Centre for the Study of Australian–Asian Relations, Nathan, 1992; Gwenda Tavan, *The Long Slow Death of White Australia*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2002.

Wales Chamber of Commerce and Julia Martinez's examination of union activism in the Northern Territory³).

The third theme in the historiography of the White Australia Policy emerged in the 1990s and focused on the administration of the White Australia Policy and its impact on specific communities and localities at specific periods in its legislative existence. Amongst the most important contributions to this field of examination are the works of Barry York, Regina Ganter and Martinez.⁴ The work on the policy's decline and its impact on various communities and localities was informed by a broader historiography of Australian-Asian engagement exemplified by the seminal works of Alison Broinowski and Walker.⁵

Work on the administration of the policy and research on the factors leading to the policy's decline are part of the same story, but there currently exists a chronological disjuncture in the historiography. The Pacific War and early postwar period have been under-examined. Work on the decline of the policy has tended to concentrate on the late-1950s (with the end of the Dictation Test) and beyond, while work on the administration of the policy has tended to concentrate on the first 40 years of its legislative existence. Such an omission is problematic for the historiography when one recalls Arthur Calwell's claim that the central pillar protecting the legislative and legal legitimacy of the White Australia Policy was knocked down by the High Court in 1949.

While some non-Europeans were able to successfully negotiate their way around the White Australia Policy during its first four decades (demonstrating that the policy was one of restriction rather than blanket exclusion), the first significant challenge to the policy's administration came during the Pacific War when 14 000 Asians sought refuge in Australia from the Japanese advance. Australia's wartime experience provoked the first significant public debate on the White Australia Policy in 1944 and this debate intensified with the war's conclusion and the Chifley Government's decision to remove from Australia the Asian wartime 'evacuees'. This decision had a pronounced impact on Australia's relations with a decolonising Asia. It provoked a variety of responses. For example, in Indonesia it complicated Australian-Indonesian-Dutch relations during the tumultuous Indonesian Revolution. For Great Britain, Australian policy complicated plans for a Commonwealth of Nations in an era of decolonisation, while for the United States it generated unwelcome criticisms of the 'Free World's' position on race as the Cold War in Asia intensified.

³ See David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999; Julia Martinez, 'Questioning "White Australia": Unionism and "coloured" labour, 1911-1937', *Labour History*, no. 79, 1999, pp. 1-19.

⁴ Barry York, *Admissions and Exclusions: Asiatics and other Coloured Races in Australia, 1901 to 1946*, Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies, Canberra, 1995; Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellfishers of Torres Strait*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994; Regina Ganter (ed.), *Asians in Australian History. Queensland Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1999; Julia Martinez, 'Asian workers in pre-war Port Darwin: exclusion and exemption', *Maritime Studies*, no. 109, 1999.

⁵ Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

The 1949 High Court decision Calwell was referring to was the result of what became known as the O'Keefe Deportation Case. I believe the then Minister of Immigration was correct in his analysis of the case: it did mark the beginning of the end of the White Australia Policy.

The O'Keefe case is a fitting topic for a Margaret George awardee in 2006. First, Margaret George's area of research was Australia and the Indonesian Revolution. While it only took up a few pages of her posthumously published book, George was the first historian to attempt to place the O'Keefe case in the context of Australian-Dutch-Indonesian relations in the late 1940s.⁶ Of course, 2006 is also fitting as Australia and the Netherlands celebrate 400 years of Dutch association with this continent.

Background

The background to the O'Keefe case is fascinating. It is a story that begins in 16th-century Europe where spices were a necessity of life. Tired of the inflated prices of Muslim middle men operating through Venice, the Dutch and Portuguese set out to find the illusive 'Spice Islands'. The Dutch were successful and established a base of power in the eastern archipelago of Indonesia. Ambon became the early administrative and commercial centre for Dutch activities. As a consequence of the European presence, the eastern archipelago became a site for the struggle of hearts, minds and souls between Islam and Christianity. Around Ambon town, Christianity was the victor first as a bastion of Portuguese Catholicism and Dutch Calvinism.

Dutch success brought more competition from Europe, notably from the Spanish. As a result, the Dutch fortified the northeast tip of Sulawesi and created the residency of Menado. By the 19th century both Ambon town and Menado were amongst the most westernised parts of Indonesia. The Ambonese and Menadonese were predominantly Christian and were very happy with the constructs of colonial power. They became the backbone of both the Indies colonial army and the colonial bureaucracy. They also helped to bring the more isolated parts of the archipelago under Dutch control. The local elite of these societies embraced Dutch culture and language and with their conversion to Christianity acquired European names. Some became what were known as orang beba or burghers; the Dutch rewarded loyal free citizens by giving them the right to apply for European legal status. Within these communities there was a special reverence for education. Teachers were important members of the community.

This is where Samuel Jacob enters the picture. The Jacob family had originally been an Ambonese family that had been given extensive landholding interests by the Dutch in the colonial backwater of the Aru Islands. Samuel's father was the local *patti* (chieftain) on the island of Maikoor and his mother was a former schoolteacher from Ambon. Like his mother, Samuel trained as a teacher in the early 1920s and was appointed to teach at a school at Gorontalo on the island of South Sulawesi. There he met another teacher from a similar stratum of Menadonese society, Annie Maas

⁶ See Margaret George, *Australia and the Indonesian Revolution*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980.

Dumais. Contravening convention that Menadonese and Ambonese never intermarried, the two were wed in June 1928 at the local Methodist church and began a family. Through the 1930s Samuel taught in a variety of locations before he was called back to the Aru Islands by his mother in 1939. His father had died and, while the position was not inherited, the community assumed that he would return and become *patti*. The Dutch also encouraged this plan with the offer of Dutch citizen status. Samuel, however, believed he could make a better contribution to his community as their teacher rather than leader. He made a request to relocate to the Aru Islands and in 1941 he was posted to the island's administrative centre, Dobo.

In 1941 Dobo was a colonial backwater. It was, however, the site of some international intrigue. The Japanese pearling fleet based in Dobo contained a number of Japanese naval intelligence officers who were disguised as pearlmen and who were supplying information back to Tokyo on a variety of issues. The British and Australians also had their man in Dobo: a private citizen named Charles Richard Sheldon who was supplying information on the Japanese to the British consul in Batavia.

The Jacobs were still in Dobo when the Japanese invaded the East Indies in 1942. The Europeans quickly fled, leaving Indonesians such as Samuel Jacob as the representatives of Dutch authority. The departure of the Dutch brought out simmering tensions within this community. The Muslim community was mostly anti-Dutch and was led by a number of Javanese nationalists who had been banished to Aru in the wake of the 1927 communist revolt. The community's Christians were mostly pro-Dutch.

In June the Muslims staged a revolt in anticipation of the arrival of the Japanese. However, the Christians – led by Jacob – successfully put down the rebellion, an act for which Jacob was later awarded a bravery medal by Queen Wilhelmina. In July 1942 the Allies decided to garrison Dobo and sent a mostly Dutch contingent codenamed Plover Force. All Plover Force did was attract Japanese attention to the Aru Islands. A few weeks after the Dutch arrived, the Japanese, led by one of the former Japanese pearlmen, invaded and Jacob was arrested. He managed to escape confinement after an Australian reconnaissance plane panicked the Japanese and, minus eldest son Sam, the Jacobs and their children escaped with the remnants of Plover Force to Darwin. The Jacob family were just some of the 14 000 Asians who found refuge in Australia during the war.

The Dutch Indies Government in exile in Australia took care of the Jacob family and housed them in the Metropole Hotel in Melbourne. Samuel, however, was determined to find a house near the water and he and Annie soon found one in the bayside community of Bonbeach. They rented the bottom floor of a house owned by a retired postal clerk called John O'Keefe.

Samuel began working for the Indies Government doing translation work. His skills soon brought him to the attention of the Netherlands Indies Forces Intelligence Service (NEFIS). He was trained as an operative and went on active duty on at least one occasion far into enemy territory in Indonesia. In September 1944 he was returning to Australia from New Guinea when the plane he was on crashed near Cairns, killing all on board. The Dutch government granted Annie a pension of £28 per month.

In earlier conversation with John O'Keefe, who had kept a small flat on the second floor of the Bonbeach house, Jacob had asked the Australian to look out for his family. With Samuel's death O'Keefe took up this responsibility and 'Uncle Jack', as he was known to the children, played a growing part in the life of the family.

With the end of the war the Australian Government moved to repatriate all Asian 'evacuees'. Because of the unsettled situation in Indonesia and the educational needs of the children, the Jacob family was allowed to stay for some time but by 1947 the Australian Government wanted them gone. Concerned for the children and believing that marriage would impart citizenship to Annie and her children, John O'Keefe married Annie Jacob. If securing citizenship had been the motivation behind the marriage it did not succeed. While Annie had lost her Dutch citizenship on marriage, the Australian Government refused to recognise that the marriage gave her any residency rights in Australia. The government did, however, issue the family with a Certificate of Exemption from the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901-1948* to allow the children to further their education and wait for the situation in Indonesia to become more settled.

The issue dragged on until early 1949 when finally Arthur Calwell moved to deport the family. This led to a High Court case and the first successful legal challenge to the White Australia Policy. Addressing the Australian Natives' Association in Bendigo in the wake of the ruling, Calwell noted:

The High Court decision in the O'Keefe case goes far beyond the question of repatriation of a single Indonesian family. It knocks down the pillars upon which the White Australia Policy has firmly rested.⁷

Calwell brought in retrospective legislation to overturn the court ruling and deport the family but before he could, Labor lost the 1949 election. The Liberal Party had been critical of Labor's handling of the matter and made certain assurances to the family. When the media interest died down in the early 1950s, however, the government did toy with asking the family to leave before finally deciding to allow them to stay. The eldest son Sam was never allowed to enter Australia and today the surviving children of the family are spread between Indonesia and Australia. John and Annie O'Keefe had a daughter, Geraldine, who today lives with her family in Perth.

Despite its significance, the O'Keefe case has been neglected by historians. After Margaret George I was probably the first historian to look at the case in any detail. I wrote of the case briefly in my 1995 book *White Peril* as an incident that greatly damaged Australia's relationship with a rapidly decolonising Asia, in part because it undermined the non-racist justifications successive Australian governments had used to defend the policy.⁸ This second theme has been explored in some greater detail in Gwenda Tavan's recent book *The Long Slow Death of White Australia*. The case was also

⁷ Cited in Sean Brawley, 'Mrs O'Keefe and the battle for White Australia: The O'Keefe case and the White Australia Policy in World War II and the early postwar period', BA Honours thesis, University of New South Wales, 1987.

⁸ Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America, 1919-1978*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995.

a backdrop to major political machinations within the Australian Labor Party (ALP) during 1949, notably as part of a struggle between Evatt and Calwell to succeed an ill Ben Chifley as leader. I have explored this dimension in a chapter in a collection of essays on HV Evatt edited by David Day.⁹

Because of its significance, the O'Keefe case is deserving of greater investigation. There is still much to be written about the events of 1949 and their consequences. This said, the more research I have conducted into the case and the themes which surround it, the more convinced I have become that the experience of the Jacob/O'Keefe family is a story deserving to be told in its own right. My current project therefore is to write a book that uses the O'Keefe family as the vehicle to address the broad themes of white Australia and Australia's Asian context in the 1940s and beyond.

Methodology

My examination of the O'Keefe case will be innovative in two ways. First and most obviously is the novelty of the subject under investigation and the fact the project will focus on specific incidents in the history of the White Australia Policy in the 1940s, producing the first monograph to address this subject area in detail and do so within a transnational framework. The current stage of historiography does call for the contribution of detailed case studies of the type proposed. Secondly, the project will extend conventional approaches to foreign relations and immigration history by offering an amalgam of several theoretical and methodological approaches to history. The project uses the life histories of the main protagonists as microhistory embedded within a transnational narrative that is informed by the notion of 'entangled history' (*histoire croisée*).

The focal point of the study will be the life histories of the key participants, most notably two extraordinary Australians: Annie Maas Jacob O'Keefe and Arthur Calwell. Because of their significance, both central characters are lightning rods that will illuminate the important themes of this study. The narrative will be driven by the actions of, and reactions to, these major characters and a host of lesser players of varying nationalities, social positions and significance.

In utilising life history as the methodological focus of the project, I share Alun Munslow's and Robert Rosenstone's conviction that biography is a 'significant historical genre' that can 'help us to both unpack and extend the nature of the historical project'.¹⁰ Further, I share David Ellis's concern that the gap between academic history and popular history is at its widest in the early 21st century and that biography is one of the last surviving points of interaction.¹¹ If my project is to hold a

⁹ Sean Brawley, 'Da Heer Evatt: The O'Keefe case and Dutch perceptions of Australian foreign policy', in David Day (ed.), *Brave New World: Dr HV Evatt and Australian Foreign Policy, 1941-1949*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996.

¹⁰ Alun Munslow, 'History and biography: An editorial comment', *Rethinking History*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1-10; and Robert Rosenstone, 'Experiments in narrative', *Rethinking History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2001, pp. 411-16.

¹¹ David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000.

national significance it must be accessible rather than a piece of jargon-ridden insular academicism.¹² The thick narrative, microhistorical and life history approaches have all been identified as forms of the historical enterprise that produce greatest accessibility for the general reader.

A number of the subjects within the project exist in simultaneous contexts. Mrs O'Keefe exists as a victim of the White Australia Policy, an Indonesian with strong pro-Dutch sentiments at the time of the Indonesian Revolution, a spy, a mother attempting to protect her children, and a woman adjusting to the social dislocation of migration and a new cultural environment. Arthur Calwell is the defender of the White Australia Policy, a politician vying for the leadership of the Labor Party, a man fighting a long and losing battle with Australian media interests, a subject of regional and international derision, and a man trying to cope with the untimely death of his son. Other broader contexts which will receive intimate focus in the study include: Allied and Japanese intelligence in Indonesia in the 1930s, Australian clergymen who called for an end to the White Australia Policy through the 1940s, Indonesian political prisoners who were confined to 'concentration camps' in northern New South Wales until 1947, and Malay seamen who were deported by the Australian government and separated from their Australian wives and children.

As István Szijarto has affirmed, good microhistory is never isolated from the level of the general or macro.¹³ Despite the intimate approach to this study as informed by microhistory and life history, the project will be a new and important contribution to the emerging field of transnational history. Transnational history has extended the early work of comparative history by highlighting the simple premise that agency does not always recognise national boundaries. A number of the simultaneous contexts that exist in this project do transcend national boundaries. Voices from Melbourne to Canberra, to Sydney, to Dobo, to Ambon, to Batavia, to Singapore, to Kuala Lumpur, to Manila, to Washington DC, to London and The Hague are present in this study – all talking about what was always championed as a matter of Australian domestic jurisdiction.

My transnational approach is informed by the French notion of *histoire croisée*. As an 'entangled history', the project's aim is to untangle the various narrative threads, and thereby deliver an authentic transnational narrative, highlighting in that very effort the significance of the subject matter. One trap of both comparative and early transnational history has been that as the focus has expanded, the works become more dependent on secondary sources and lose insights that might otherwise have emerged. By keeping a microhistorical and life history approach, the narrative can sustain primary research across national boundaries.

The actual research and writing for this project will be driven by a desire to provide a text informed by Geertz's notion of 'thick description'. Much life- and micro-history share the priorities of thick description; namely, that they are the product of intensive primary research, are richly textured, and they strive for the real. I see no

¹² David Cannadine, *What is History Now?*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002.

¹³ István Szijarto, 'Four arguments for microhistory', *Rethinking History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2002.

contradiction between an acknowledgement of history as a cultural process and the desire to strive for the real; it is indeed another means by which the project will be more accessible to a general readership.

Specific themes that will be explored include the maintenance of, and postwar challenges to, the White Australia Policy; Australia's Asian context and Asian decolonisation; race and racism as emotional and intellectual debates; postwar European migration; race and citizenship in postwar Australian migration law; Allied intelligence during World War II and Dutch spying in Australia in the postwar period; America and the Cold War in Asia; the role of the Australian media in public debate; the internal workings of the Chifley Government and the bureaucracy of the 1940s; the federal government's troubled relationship with the judiciary during the 1940s; and new insights into Labor's defeat in the 1949 election.

The great challenge of this project will be to manage these various components and deliver a coherent and engaging monograph. I believe this will be achieved by making the two subjects the central focus of the narrative and allowing their experiences to become jumping-off points for exploring the wider transnational themes mentioned. Further, seeds will be embedded early in the narrative that will blossom later in the story. Arthur Calwell's difficulties with Australian newspaper publishers when he was Minister of Information during World War II will be discussed. The issue will then be revisited and offered as an explanation for why the Australian media supported Mrs O'Keefe rather than supporting the government's stance on the White Australia Policy.

The National Archives of Australia and Mrs O'Keefe

Deep archival research is crucial to achieve my methodological goals for the project. To date, research for the project has taken me to Indonesia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. These visits have all provided invaluable pieces to my jigsaw. At the core of the research, however, are archives held in Australia and in the National Archives of Australia. The breadth of the topic has also meant that my ongoing research here in the National Archives is very broad covering a large number of agencies. To date I have examined files of various Australian Government agencies including Defence, External Affairs, Immigration, Attorney-General's, Information, Education, Post-War Reconstruction, Commonwealth Investigation Branch and the Prime Minister's Department. Today I wish to highlight the importance of the National Archives to this project with two examples.

The first example comes from files found in the departments of the Attorney-General (notably A432, 1949/127) and Immigration. The O'Keefe's legal team was very much influenced by the famous Bank Nationalisation Case. In this famous case of the 1940s, the High Court found that in exercising its delegated powers the Federal Parliament could not infringe on any of the provisions of the *Constitution Act 1900-1934*.

The O'Keefe's legal team had a two-pronged attack. First they argued that Mrs O'Keefe could not be deported because she was not an 'immigrant'. She and her children had been 'assimilated' into the Australian community. While Federal Parliament is entrusted to deal with 'immigration and emigration' and 'naturalisation

and aliens', her lawyers argued that the Commonwealth could not use these powers against an individual who was not an immigrant. To do so would be to contravene the powers held by the Federal Parliament.

Secondly, the government was deporting Mrs O'Keefe by revoking the Certificate of Exemption she had been issued in 1947. Taking the argument over Mrs O'Keefe's immigrant status further, her barristers argued she was not eligible to receive such a certificate in 1947 because she had never been classified as a prohibited immigrant on grounds of personal deficiency or a failure to pass the Dictation Test. Because of the nature in which the Jacobs had entered Australia they had never sat the Dictation Test.

In the Immigration Department, the argument of the O'Keefe's legal team held enormous consequences if proven. The Department believed that the nation's entire postwar migration program was under threat. The specific problem was seen to relate to the Displaced Persons program.

To ensure union acquiescence to the Displaced Persons scheme the Commonwealth had been compelled to force displaced persons to sign contracts agreeing to work anywhere in Australia during the first two years after their arrival at the direction of the Commonwealth. This meant that these migrants could be discriminated against and steered away from jobs or localities where the union movement feared their presence. The measure the Commonwealth had introduced to enforce the contracts was the Certificate of Exemption system. To maintain control over displaced persons the Commonwealth issued Certificates of Exemption for the two-year period. If a displaced person broke the contract the Commonwealth could simply rescind the Certificate of Exemption and deport them.

If the court accepted the arguments of the O'Keefe's legal team, then displaced persons could argue that because they had not been classified as prohibited immigrants on arrival the Certificates of Exemption could not be applied to them. If this transpired, Calwell feared that this would unsettle the union movement and inevitably lead to a rejection of the entire program. Mrs O'Keefe was not just threatening the White Australia Policy but the entire immigration program.

In its deliberations the High Court simply sidestepped the broader questions of when a person was an immigrant and when and how they ceased to be an immigrant. The court quickly established that Mrs O'Keefe's residency status in 1949 was unimportant. The issue was whether the Immigration Act had applied to Mrs O'Keefe when she was granted her first Certificate of Exemption in January 1947.

By a majority of four to two the court ruled that 'The plaintiff was not a person liable to be prohibited from remaining in the Commonwealth'. The four majority judges had been unable to find any clause in the Immigration Act that made Mrs O'Keefe a prohibited immigrant. Because she had not sat the Dictation Test and five years had passed since her arrival, Mrs O'Keefe could not now be given the test to become an illegal immigrant.

More research is needed to explore the consequences of the High Court decision for the Displaced Persons program. Obviously the ruling did not undermine the scheme or the broader migration program. In the wake of the decision Calwell introduced

retrospective legislation to see off the threat of a non-European person being allowed to stay in Australia indefinitely. The old rule regarding the Dictation Test having to be applied within the first five years an immigrant was in the country was removed. The Dictation Test could be given at any time. As a result, an individual who had not sat the test when granted permission to enter the country could always be subject to the Dictation Test, labelled a prohibited immigrant and deported.

Many people believe that the National Archives holds within its files the voices of government and its bureaucracy. Files relating to the O'Keefe case add further evidence to challenge that perception. A variety of files relating to the case (notably the private papers of Ben Chifley, M1455, and Immigration Department files containing ministerial correspondence, A446) hold within them the viewpoints of ordinary Australians on the O'Keefe case.

Both Calwell and Chifley had been petitioned from time to time by private citizens on the White Australia Policy, but the O'Keefe case brought a flood of letters to the two men from a wide variety of individuals and community groups. This source is important because while letters to the editor pages are also useful in gaining this perspective, the anti-Calwell, anti-government position of the press during the O'Keefe case does raise issues about the representativeness of this source of Australian opinion.

Many of the letters to Calwell and Chifley noted that the motivation of the press was to destroy the government and not necessarily save the O'Keefe family. GA Dickins of Kew noted that 'the daily press in its criticism is not prompted by altruistic motives but rather to embarrass the Federal Government'.¹⁴ The members of the Hammondville branch of the ALP, the dormitory suburb for Sydney's Holsworthy army base, demanded the Minister reverse his decision but in doing so insisted that their decision had not been 'in any way' influenced by the 'tory press'.¹⁵

That the O'Keefe family were considered valued members of their local community is demonstrated by the number of letters the government received from residents of the Chelsea community. Mr G Phillips JP was one man who wrote to Calwell. Phillips was a member of the local branch of the ALP, and was a former past president of the branch. He immediately disassociated himself from the 'hysterical outburst of the press' such as the *Herald*, 'which has no real regard for these people but simply sees a chance to injure the Labor government', but still called for a review of the decision and sung the praises of the family.

Phillips' letter alludes to the struggle within the ALP to come to grips with the White Australia Policy and Australia's place in Asia. John O'Keefe was himself a member of the local branch of the ALP and the Jacob children often performed at branch functions. This was a branch that was already in conflict as the industrial groups were attempting to take control, another interesting subtext to this story.

¹⁴ NAA: A446, 1959/60956. Note that this file has been destroyed.

¹⁵ NAA: M1455, 365.

But locals were not the only individuals expressing their concern about the treatment of the family. Letters arrived from all over Australia. Mr M Chesher of Bentleigh in Victoria wrote to Chifley:

It appears to many of us that the energetic Mr Calwell is perpetuating another of his blunders in this matter which, if he is not restrained will cost the government very many votes at the election — especially the catholic vote. I think therefore in the best interests of your party it would do no harm and very much good to call him finally to heel.¹⁶

One correspondent suggested that Calwell's act was 'Godless and unchristian'.¹⁷ Calwell was a devout Catholic and had strong connections with the church, notably with Melbourne Archbishop Daniel Mannix. On the issue of the White Australia Policy, however, Calwell and Mannix had divergent views. Mannix had already expressed a call for the policy's liberalisation. John O'Keefe was also well connected in the Catholic Church and the Jacob children, after their mother's marriage, had converted to Catholicism. Indeed the media saga had begun when a local Catholic priest had used the pulpit to attack Calwell's call for deportation. This struggle within the Catholic Church is another dimension of the story.

Was Mrs O'Keefe a spy?

I still have some way to go in my research in the Archives. One area that does require further research despite a significant search both here and abroad relates to the suggestion that Mrs O'Keefe was a Dutch spy who kept an eye on Indonesian republicans in Australia. It is certainly the case that both the Dutch government and military intelligence had spies working in their expatriate Indonesian communities in Australia to keep tabs on those who might pose a threat to the return of Dutch rule in Indonesia. By 1945 this intelligence had helped the Dutch to begin to remove the most dangerous Republicans back to Dutch New Guinea. Further, it led to the wholesale arrest of many Indonesian soldiers and sailors who were placed in what critics called a 'concentration camp' in Casino in northern New South Wales.

In early 1945 the then Mrs Jacob left her family for a trip to Sydney. A photograph in the family album captures the moment. Was this trip to Sydney, which was paid for by the East Indies Government, to recruit her as an agent in the Melbourne Indonesian community of which she was a popular member? Or was she already spying and this was actually a mission to spy on Indonesian republicans in Sydney? To date my efforts in Australian and Dutch archives have revealed little. Certainly there is the suggestion in comments made by the Dutch deputy consul in Melbourne, in communications with his superiors in Canberra, that Mrs O'Keefe had performed this role. Also implicit in these comments is the suggestion that one of the reasons for her decision to engage in this work was that she had been promised that the Dutch authorities would speak to the Australian government and ensure she be allowed to stay in Australia.

¹⁶ NAA: A446, 1959/60956.

¹⁷ NAA: A446, 1959/60956.

It is the case that Mrs O'Keefe was associated with an East Indies Government-sponsored welfare organisation for Indonesians in Australia and it has been suggested that this organisation was a front for NEFIS, but I still need more evidence. Australian intelligence files have so far revealed nothing. This is interesting because Australian intelligence was monitoring the Indonesian community. If I can dig nothing up here, a possible line of attack is through British archives. This is because the daughter of the Dutch Minister to Australia, Tanya Teppema, had herself done some surveillance on such matters and later married the second-in-command of the British intelligence contingent that had been sent to Australia to help establish the Australian Security Intelligence Organization.

The deeper one delves into the O'Keefe case the more one is drawn into this fascinating story. It is the stuff of a television mini-series. With the assistance of the National Archives of Australia, I intend to share this story with a wider audience.

© 2006 Sean Brawley. Dr Sean Brawley is a Senior Lecturer at the School of History, University of New South Wales. He was a National Archives Margaret George Award winner in 2006. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent those of the National Archives of Australia.