

# The ‘Southern Question’ in Australia: The 1925 Royal Commission’s Racialisation of Southern Italians<sup>§</sup>

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Thomas Arthur Ferry (1877-1963) conducted several Royal Commissions in his role as under-secretary for Queensland’s Premier and Chief Secretary’s Department. His now frequently cited first Report of 1925 (the Ferry Report) remains the most controversial. He investigated settlers from European countries as diverse as Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy, Malta, Russia and Yugoslavia in various districts from Mackay to Cairns. Maltese, Greeks and Italians, notably Sicilians, featured most in the Report because of their purported larger numbers in the sugar industry. Aside from Finns, Commissioner Ferry questioned whether these ‘races’ could be assimilated. Although Southern and Eastern Europeans were never denied entry into Australia on



*Canecutters at Childers, 1917: Les Tsimeris cane gang - all Greek except the Italian far left.*

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

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the basis of colour, the Commonwealth Government applied restrictions during the 1920s due to British preferences.<sup>1</sup> Ferry was the first official figure to reframe such restrictions on racial calibre. He justified his recommendations for implementing a better migrant selection process on behavioural and moral characteristics. Where Italians were concerned, he went further to suggest that their racial fitness could also be determined by physical traits, informed by pseudo-scientific beliefs. While racialising Southern Italians, he articulated the 'Southern Question', but this Royal Commission was also symptomatic of systemic racism in Australia.

It is widely acknowledged that Australia's settler society was built on concepts and acts of racism, which established the political and social foundations of racialised systems.<sup>2</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies 'racialized social systems' as operating across 'economic, political, social, and ideological levels... [that have] a structural foundation'.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the 1925 Royal Commission represents one of a series of contributing responses that sustained racism. The Report's influence is discernable in subsequent social and political action as well, where protests were side-stepped. Set up to examine complaints about 'the large numbers of foreign immigrants arriving in North Queensland' and 'the number of breaches of awards committed by aliens',<sup>4</sup> the Report stands out for its racialisation of Southern Italians. Within the setting of North Queensland and the highly profitable sugar industry, the Report focused on issues that remained unresolved, which can be gleaned through developments by 1933. While the Report features in the historiography of Queensland's European race relations, its wider significance as part of a racialised system requires attention.

At issue in the Ferry Report was the fear that Italians and other Southern Europeans were taking over sugar industry jobs and farmland. After its publication, some outspoken public contemporaries rose to their defence.<sup>5</sup> Consular officials also protested, best illustrated by the Consul General of Greece stating that Greeks had been used as 'pawns in a game of political chess'.<sup>6</sup> Writing to the Premier of Queensland, the Prime Minister was at pains to point out the errors in the Queensland Government's understanding of the migrant numbers, the Commonwealth's policy measures, and relevant international agreements in place.<sup>7</sup> The Commonwealth in fact produced a scathing internal assessment, distancing itself from the Report's approach to the serious 'subject of racial tide-waves in Australia'.<sup>8</sup> Only since the 1950s have scholars emphasised Ferry's irrational hostility to Southern Italians and the contradictions in his racialist approach.<sup>9</sup> The Report can be situated initially against a backdrop of polarised debates and rampant racism, most evident in a xenophobic crusade driven by the press.<sup>10</sup> However, anti-foreigner sentiment alone was powerless against deterring non-British migrants from

working in North Queensland. Indeed, with immigration policy in the hands of the Commonwealth, lobbying the state government through the backing of some powerful social organisations proved more effective. William Douglass identifies the power struggles over the issues investigated by Ferry as between Queensland's Labor Party and sugar industry representatives, on the one hand, and the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth, on the other.<sup>11</sup>

Premier William Neal Gillies first telegraphed Prime Minister Hon Stanley Melbourne Bruce MP on 30 March 1925 to signal concerns about the 'recent influx [of] aliens to North Queensland', the need for the Commonwealth 'to check or regulate [the] flow of aliens', and the suggestion of a 'full enquiry' to avoid 'serious industrial trouble'.<sup>12</sup> Within two days, the Premier again sent word of his decision to appoint a Royal Commission.<sup>13</sup> Before his election in 1925, Premier Gillies had been involved in the Anti-Alien League and the Sugar Defence League.<sup>14</sup> Both leagues aimed to privilege British-Australian workers in North Queensland over new migrants of European origins. Several other organisations were operating with similar aims during the 1920s and 1930s although Italians founded their own Foreign Cutters' Defence Organisation in 1932.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically a supporter of Italian sugarcane workers, Premier Gillies was pressured to agree to the Royal Commission by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and a member of his Party.<sup>16</sup> The AWU was calling for a 75 per cent assurance of jobs for British-Australians in the industry. When the Report was published, Gillies backed its recommendations fully.<sup>17</sup> By 1930 the AWU had joined forces with the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Cane Growers' Association to reach a 'Gentlemen's Agreement', which reinforced the racialised selection of cane cutters and farm workers through the 75/25 per cent quota.<sup>18</sup> By 1933 the quota had increased to 86/14 per cent, by which time Premier William Forgan Smith was promoting a Bill to amend *The Regulation of Sugar Cane Prices Acts Amendment Act* in order to legalise restrictions on the selling and leasing of assigned farmland.<sup>19</sup> Such developments form a narrative for understanding the workings of systemic racism.

Drawing from Bonilla-Silva's theory of 'racialized social systems' and Thomas Guglielmo's application of this framework in his analysis of Italian-Americans in Chicago, this article focuses on the racist origins, continuities and implications of the Ferry Report which crystallised the racist attitudes of the day. As Bonilla-Silva argues, 'racism is only part of a larger racial system'.<sup>20</sup> The global context of race science informs our understanding of how Italians could be racialised in the first place. Italy produced the Southern Question in the late nineteenth century, which became topical in the United States because an increase of Southern Italian immigration coincided with race nationalism. American debates on Southern Europeans influenced ideas

about racial hierarchies in Australia that were already established. Although the circulation of opinions about distinct differences between Northern and Southern Italians dates back to Queensland's colonial parliament in 1891, with the press propagating such views over subsequent decades,<sup>21</sup> the Report emphasised Southern Italians' racial inferiority. By considering the historical roots of the Southern Question and changes in Australia's immigration policy, as well as reactions, denials and silences after 1925, this article positions the Ferry Report as historically significant to the workings of systemic racism in Australia.



*The Unprotected Female.*

(*The Boomerang*, 14 November 1891, cover page)



## The Southern Question

Racism is a complex phenomenon with its origins stemming from a political construction for economic profit and power. In this respect, the Ferry Report symbolises what Guglielmo positions as ‘the structural nature of race’, evident in the ‘resources and rewards’ available across numerous kinds of institutions functioning within an established racial hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> Bonilla-Silva defines ‘racial structure’ as ‘the specific mechanisms, practices and social relations that produce and reproduce racial inequality’.<sup>23</sup> He describes the insidious steps of racialised systems as transforming racism from blatant forms of expression to more nuanced forms over time. Such systems become ‘increasingly covert’ and are ‘embedded in normal operations of institutions’, while also shirking ‘racial terminology’ and remaining ‘invisible to most Whites’. As he puts it:

although the racialization of peoples was socially invented and did not override previous forms of social distinction based on class or gender, it did not lead to imaginary relations but generated new forms of human association with definite status differences.<sup>24</sup>

Racialisation represents the layering of both economic advantages and race hierarchy onto the structural and cultural fabric of a society.<sup>25</sup> All Italian migrants were exposed to racialisation in Australia, whether directly or indirectly, but the racialisation of those from the South originated in Italy.

Italian positivist criminologists contributed to essentialising and racialising Southern Italians between the 1870s and 1890s<sup>26</sup> during the rise of Italian nationalism and imperialism. Pseudo-scientific theories reinforced a racial division between Northern and Southern Italians because the South was considered agriculturally underdeveloped, reliant on clientelism, and industrially impotent. Brigandage reinforced assumptions about the unlawful and anarchic nature of the South.<sup>27</sup> Italy’s pursuit of imperial power at this time coincided with intellectual civilising currents, like Social Darwinism and ‘white man’s burden’, which prompted contemporary interpretations about the political need to colonise the South.<sup>28</sup> When Italians began to emigrate in mass numbers to the United States, they triggered anxieties about the deterioration of the American race and fuelled the rhetoric of race hierarchies that focused on certain ‘races’ as having an innate predisposition for crime. Southern Italians, in particular, were faced with the dual racialised system of race and colour in the United States, where they were still frequently targeted as an inferior ‘race’ but better off than others because they were white.<sup>29</sup> Guglielmo argues that, while Chicago’s Italian-Americans were racially undesirable, they were rarely denied access to resources through various institutions because of their privileged whiteness.<sup>30</sup> His discussion highlights the importance of analysing structural forms of racialisation for their continuities.

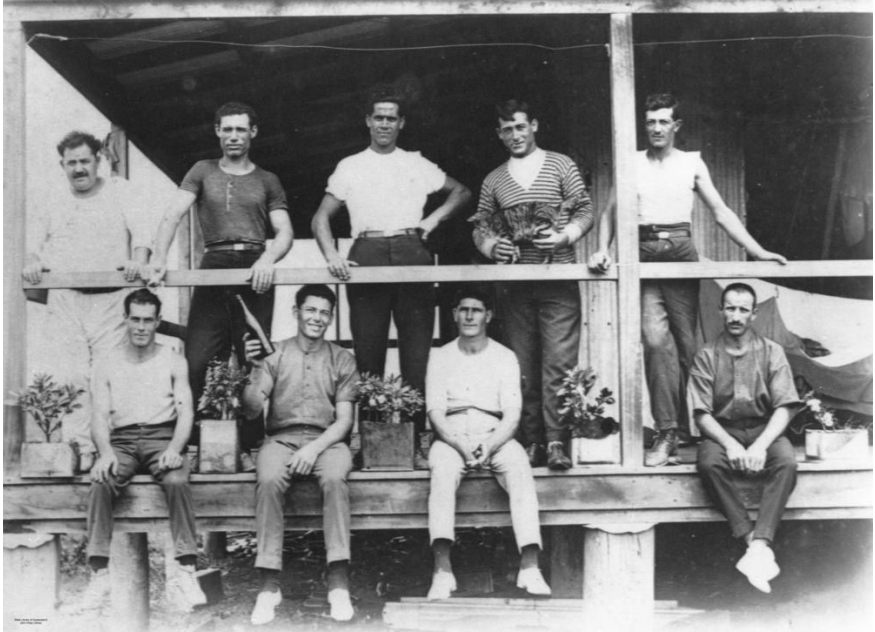
According to Douglas Cole, a growing ‘consciousness of white kinship’ that drew on the English heritage emerged in Australia between 1890 and 1914 in order to protect the population’s ‘race purity’.<sup>31</sup> Australians began projecting a national identity by the late nineteenth century, but the issue of morality emerged since those ‘races’, scientifically ‘proven’ to be biologically inferior, threatened the plan. These views targeted non-white peoples but they also encompassed certain non-British white nationals, like those from the Mediterranean region.<sup>32</sup> Alleged racial differences amongst white peoples had the power to contaminate the engineering of ‘a new and better race of white men’ – one that even promised to surpass the British.<sup>33</sup> Queensland already had a reputation for sanctioning racism against non-white peoples.<sup>34</sup> However, in 1891 anti-Italian tirades erupted when the Government negotiated with Italy for an Italian immigration scheme.<sup>35</sup> Well over 300 Northern Italian farmers arrived at a time of nascent trade unionism and nationalistic zeal in order to replace South Sea Islander workers on the sugarcane fields. It is worth highlighting why *The Boomerang* called Italians, amongst others, ‘cheap alien labour’:

The native Australian who expects a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work will find himself crowded out of Northern Queensland by Jarvanese, Kanakas, Chinese, and Italians each and all, bringing with them the diseases and vices of their special nationalities until the land is eaten up by the offscourings of the earth, and becomes a by-word among nations.<sup>36</sup>

While few Australians understood Italians’ complex regional and provincial origins, let alone the politics of race science, workers’ awards and land ownership were controversial. In their debates about the 1891 scheme, Queensland’s politicians invoked a racial discourse by defending Northern Italians as ‘an extremely frugal, industrious and scientifically horticultural and agricultural race’, and referring to potential Neapolitans as ‘the scum of the city’ and Italy as producing ‘a larger murder rate than any other country in Europe’.<sup>37</sup> ‘There are Italians and Italians’, one politician remarked.

To be sure, Italians were not discriminated against on the basis of colour or to the degree that Aborigines, Chinese, Pacific Islanders and others classified as Asian or black were. Italians were also generally not restricted entry because they had European origins and were protected under international law by the *Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between the United Kingdom and Italy of 1883*, which guaranteed them the same rights as British subjects.<sup>38</sup> However, Australia’s settler composition was changing around the time of Federation, which saw attitudes toward the Irish about their racial inferiority and threats to homogeneity shift to Italians.<sup>39</sup> As John MacDonald and Leatrice MacDonald put it:

Italian immigration became the largest non-British movement after entry of Melanesians and Asians was stopped by the new Federal government in 1902.



*Canecutters relax on a verandah at Innisfail, 1927.*

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

This put Italians at the bottom of the Australian “racial totem pole,” just above the Aborigines. The volume of arrivals, the proportion of settlers in the total population of Australia, and the size of Italian agglomerated settlements were trivial by international standards. Yet the establishment of fifty Italian households within a radius of five miles or the employment of twenty Italians on a job were cause for alarm in Australian eyes.<sup>40</sup>

This hostility against non-British communities continued to gain momentum into the 1920s. Michele Langfield refers to ‘a dual immigration policy’ emerging after World War I ‘to regulate ‘white’ non-British immigration’.<sup>41</sup> The Commonwealth’s White Australia policy amendments between 1924 and 1929 limited European immigrants by setting annual quotas and increasing the landing fee from £10 to £40, payable with the exception of a personal guarantee.<sup>42</sup> More damaging were the links made between migrant numbers and racial hygiene. European status was no protection against categorisations of inferior ‘race’ or stereotypes of colour when debates turned to the capacity of white men to work in Queensland’s tropical climate.<sup>43</sup> As one contemporary official explained a few days after the publication of Ferry’s Report: ‘White labour in the north... was not as efficient as black labour in other countries... [due to] the unhygienic conditions under which these workers live, and the unsuitable diet they adopt.’<sup>44</sup>

## The Ferry Report

The Ferry Report reads sensationally for a Royal Commission although Ferry avoids overtly racist language. Moreover, the influence of the United States' 1921 and 1924 restrictions on Southern and Eastern Europeans is unmistakable. In its introduction, the Report lists the American quota system as the first and most serious of five 'causes' responsible for increasing migrant numbers in Australia.<sup>45</sup> Ferry explained that the 1921 quotas reduced the number of foreign immigrants to three per cent of the national group total, extant in 1910.<sup>46</sup> But the United States Government revised this number down to two per cent in 1924 because of 'too great a number of Southern Europeans'. This immediately reduced 37 968 Italians out of 127 463 Southern and Eastern Europeans.<sup>47</sup> Where were these people to go now? Ferry insinuated that monumental sizes would flood Australia. Indeed, he claimed that Australia was already witnessing 'an immediate further increase' in their numbers to the extent that, since 1924, Italians and Greeks were no longer arriving in Queensland at '150 per annum' but at '6,854 per annum'.<sup>48</sup> In reality, Italian numbers alone rose from 1838 in 1921 to 8355 in 1933.<sup>49</sup>

Ferry continued his alarmist tactics in the rest of his discussion of separate national groups, prefaced by anecdotal 'evidence' from two Italians he had interviewed. The first was the prominent figure from Ingham, Giuseppe Cantamessa, who was reported as having said that one Italian returned to Italy but not before 'he made out a couple of hundred application forms for people to come here'.<sup>50</sup> The second anonymous 'witness' from Cairns allegedly said that, back in Italy, 'people have been spreading reports that there is plenty of work in Australia at very high wages, and that immigrants could make a lot of money in a short time.' Ferry applied similar methods<sup>51</sup> to assess the behaviour and morality of Maltese, Greeks, including Albanians, and Italians. If the arrivals of Maltese needed to be capped, Greeks had to be prohibited altogether.<sup>52</sup> For instance, Ferry described where Albanian and Greek woodcutters lived as 'a place no better than a black's camp'.<sup>53</sup> He also suggested his adherence to pseudo-scientific theories of race:

It is stated that in the modern economic struggle the displacement of one race by another takes place at the bottom, and that the effective weapon of displacement is a lower standard of living.<sup>54</sup>

But, in turning to Italians, Ferry moved beyond links between behaviour and racial inferiority to the racial stratification between Italy's North and South.

The Report's section on Italians opens with a description of two well-known Italian migration schemes, involving Northern Italians in New South Wales in the 1880s and in North Queensland in the 1890s. However, Ferry whitewashed the hostile public outcry aroused at the time of each and proceeded to vilify recently arrived Southern Italians through comparisons.<sup>55</sup> Those Northern



Italians who settled in North Queensland ‘conformed to the laws of the State and the British standard of living’, and had strong endorsement from the AWU and others for their work in the sugar industry. As Ferry states:

The general opinion is that the Northern Italian is a very desirable class of immigrant. He is thrifty and industrious, law abiding, and honest in business transactions. Those arriving in the past have generally been trained agriculturalists, many of whom have become successful farmers. It is said that the Italian is not a pioneer and prefers to take up farms already made.<sup>56</sup>

These Italians resided on established farms and their children were ‘well cared for’ and attended school.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, the more recent influx ‘from the South, many of them Sicilians’, were ‘shorter in stature and more swarthy’, bringing with them a tradition of ‘very low [wages] and living conditions’. They had a reputation for illiteracy and were also ‘more inclined to form groups and less likely to be assimilated into the population of the State’.<sup>58</sup> Assimilation meant ‘full intermarriage... without suggesting difference of race or ethnic origin’, and the capacity ‘to speak the English language’ and to abide by local ‘laws and industrial conditions’.<sup>59</sup> Ferry warned that this ‘hopelessly inferior type, easily exploited, and as great a menace to the better class foreign immigrant as they are to the British’ would magnify ‘the breach between the Australian and the better type of foreigner’, and ‘breed racial hatreds’.<sup>60</sup> He implied inter-Italian antagonism by referring to the sacrifices and resentments of some workers. According to scholars, around this time there were cases of racist sentiments being expressed by Northern Italians against Southern Italians in order to escape such attacks themselves.<sup>61</sup>

Citing several passages from the United States Congressional Committee hearings as well as race literature, Ferry supported his call to protect Australia from the ‘mental, moral, or physical demoralisation’ that Southern Italians would spread.<sup>62</sup> He hinted at an inclination for misconduct amongst Sicilians and others:

It is worth noting that [men from the North of Italy] hailed originally from the cool mountains of Piedmont and Lombardy and are much superior to Southern Italians and the Mediterranean races generally. There is sufficient evidence to show that many of the new arrivals are of the latter type here referred to. Their behaviour in the trains in crowding out the carriages and jostling women and children is adding to the objection to foreigners generally, and their standard of living is obviously very low. According to the evidence of one witness the principal offenders in this respect are Maltese, Sicilians, and Greeks.<sup>63</sup>

Such anecdotal evidence from an unnamed source would be repeated later during the internment hearings. But, by describing the North as ‘cool’ and nominating ‘Sicilians’ amongst Maltese and Greeks as ‘offenders’, Ferry was accentuating the unarticulated ‘warm’ South and how these migrants did not conform to social mores. Yet, Southern Italians were also questioned for their improper dealings over land.

According to Ferry, Southern Italians were buying farmland through unacceptable practices and driving land prices up.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, vendors were selling their properties with low deposits for long-term leases and benefitting from crop payments:

In many cases farms have been subdivided into smaller areas, thus increasing the number of cane-growers. In cases where the full amount of purchase money has not been paid the farm will appear in the mill's books as British owned, whereas it may be partly paid for and occupied and worked by Italians or other foreigners.<sup>65</sup>

The root of the problem was a tradition of forming co-operatives to cultivate agricultural land. Apart from an uninformed understanding of the complexities of agricultural practices by Italians,<sup>66</sup> Ferry's example of increasing Italian farm-ownership and shares in the district of Mossman was meant to exaggerate his point. As he stated: 'In this district farms carry shares in the mill, and in time it is probable that the Italians will have complete control of the mill and will also control the employment of the cutters required'.<sup>67</sup> Ferry was either ignorant about the distinctive workings of the Mossman Central Mill Company's shareholdings, which were linked to the original sugarcane owners' properties and tightly controlled by the Company's Board,<sup>68</sup> or he deliberately aimed to mislead his readers by resorting to scaremongering tactics. He concluded his Report with a series of structural measures to counteract his findings: discourage 'foreign clubs in a British community'; keep 'the proportion of foreign-born to native-born' in check by applying new regulations, the nomination system, and correct 'racial stock' selections; regulate immigration according 'to the nationality and fitness of the immigrant, the number arriving at any one time and for any locality'; use 'deportation' for criminals; and enforce 'Stricter Medical Examinations', official record-keeping, and intervention.<sup>69</sup> In questioning immigration policy, the Report reflected Queensland's dissatisfaction over the Commonwealth's immigration controls.

### **'protection to those who give a fair deal'**

The Ferry Report had an immediate impact on the public imagination. Within days of its publication, *The Argus* commented on rumours expressed in Queensland's parliament:

many aliens were ever ready to resort to the revolver, knife, or dagger on the smallest provocation, and... their feelings, passions, and ideas regarding the safety of human life were vastly different from our own.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, Vance Palmer published an article that began with a description of 'the invasion' of a trainload of raucous Italian sugarcane workers arriving in Ingham.<sup>71</sup> Disrupting the peace of the day and inciting resentment from one local, they were greeted by 'a babble of vivacious talk' from 'the crowd' on the platform. After the 'kisses... noises, laughter, tooting of motor-horns' and general 'excitement', the passengers and their baggage were



*Canecutters' picnic, Babinda District, 1929.*

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

'bundled into the waiting cars and buggies, to be driven out over the muddy roads to half a hundred different cane-farms'. However, Palmer cleverly used this caricature to defuse misconceptions about Italians by advising that 'it is well to guard against distorting what is a local and largely economic question into a national and racial one'.<sup>72</sup> Two years later, in a book aimed to reposition Europeans' contributions to Australian society, Danish migrant Jens Lyng reinforced contemporary beliefs in the 'racial strains' of Italy's 'Alpine' and 'Mediterranean' types. He wrote that the latter 'are backward and the living standard of the people low'.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Lyng lifted Palmer's description in full to reinforce Ferry's racial concerns about Southern Italians, noting the 'strained feeling' about farm ownership.<sup>74</sup>

In its response, the Commonwealth downplayed the national implications of the Report and virtually all of Ferry's recommendations.<sup>75</sup> Inspector Diarmid Alexander Mackiehan of the Attorney-General's Department described Ferry as 'an unfortunate' choice who, 'handicapped in such a serious task by the fact that he is a Government Servant... found it difficult to sort the issues with an impartial hand...'. Mackiehan also highlighted Ferry's reliance on biased AWU sources. The issue of reducing access to sugar industry jobs and land through racial selections reemerged during the global economic crisis. This became transparent from the political activism of Southern Europeans themselves against the 1930 Gentlemen's Agreement and political dissent against the 1933 amendment Bill.

In June 1930 the AWU joined with the sugar industry's two other most powerful organisations – the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Cane Growers' Association – to convene a conference to discuss the problem of non-British workers.<sup>76</sup> Their Gentlemen's Agreement stipulated that only 'British' unionists could be employed on cane farms, reiterating the AWU's racialised preference from 1925 for a 75/25 per cent quota. They made some exceptions for the Mourilyan, Macknade and Victoria mills, where fewer British-Australians were available, but the 'British cutter' was defined as Australian-born and the power of the AWU was reinforced. More problematic was the alteration of the quota in 1933 to 86/14 per cent.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, it was being policed and enforced by the local Mill Suppliers Committee at the Kalamia mill in the district of Ayr. This led to naturalised Italians and other Southern Europeans taking action. They presented a 'Petition' to the Governor-General and the King, as well as the Prime Minister, to appeal against their exclusion from jobs.<sup>78</sup> As they explained:

we naturalised British subjects are to be excluded from the benefits granted to Britishers by the said agreement, and we are being systematically so excluded. [...] The recent insertion of three new clauses in the award for the Kalamia mill area made under the regulation of Sugar Cane Prices Acts 1915-'31 are directed against the naturalised British subjects... [and] do not provide any provision protecting us from victimisation when the powers conferred by the three new clauses come to be exercised.

While the King and Governor-General were noticeably silent – at least publicly – Premier Forgan Smith explained that these three clauses related to anomalies in the assignment of sugarcane land because of the economic downturn.<sup>79</sup>

Within three months of the migrants' Petition, Minister for Agriculture and Stock Frank William Bulcock tabled the amendment Bill, which MP Godfrey Morgan interpreted as attempting 'to prevent a naturalised Australian obtaining sugar land'.<sup>80</sup> Clause 3, in particular, aimed to restrict the sale or lease of assigned farmland by legislating that the Central Sugar Cane Prices Board could 'refuse cane grown on unassigned land'. As Leader of the Opposition Arthur Edward Moore stated:

The clause opened the way for victimisation and favouritism. It aided an industrial organisation in its attempt to make the sugar industry a close corporation for a favoured section of the community.<sup>81</sup>

And, MP William Alfred Brand pointed out:

If this provision was not directed against Italians in the sugar industry there was no reason for it in the Bill... Despite the denials of the Premier and the Minister the object of the clause was to keep persons of one nationality out of the industry.<sup>82</sup>

Responding in his parliamentary speech, the Premier effectively harkened back to Ferry's logic. Indeed, he reiterated the problems about abiding by

awards and proper land transactions by qualifying the amendment as giving all ‘a fair deal’:

the vendor is securing cheap labour for the operation of his farm, much cheaper than he would obtain it had he paid these men the industrial award rates, and at the same time he is never dispossessed of his property. [...] A person unfit to receive an assignment is a person proved guilty of trickery and subterfuge of various kinds, and merely desires a lease or assignment for the purpose of sub-letting. This clause is very definite in that respect. It gives protection to those who give a fair deal.<sup>83</sup>

When both the Premier and the Minister declared that there would ‘no unfair discrimination in the Bill’,<sup>84</sup> they revealed their blindness to the abuse of power that was being legislated. Archbishop Duhig clarified the situation in the Italian-Australian press:

any directions to guide the board in forming a judgment as to who is or is not a fit and proper person to hold an assignment, are entirely absent and dangerous wide and unwarranted powers are bestowed on a few men – powers which cannot be justified no matter how trustworthy those men may be. It is little wonder that at the first reading of the Bill Mr. Fadden, the Member for Kennedy, styled it “a lion in a lamb’s skin”.<sup>85</sup>

The Premier continued to deny that he had been motivated by racial factors when he received a letter from Prime Minister Joseph Lyons regarding the Consul General of Italy’s protests:

I emphatically and definitely denied a statement that the Bill was designed against certain sections of the community. I also clearly indicated that there was nothing in the Bill directed against any national, nor was it proposed to discriminate against any class or classes of persons.<sup>86</sup>

This denial, however, was based on assertions in a parliamentary speech and the Bill had already been passed. In reality, the Premier had failed to recognise the discriminatory nature of the powers controlling the industry in which he himself had played a role.

The Ferry Report epitomised overt racism within the political and social fabric of the state and the Commonwealth. In passing *The Regulation of the Sugar Cane Prices Acts Amendment Act Bill* eight years later, the Queensland Government endorsed Ferry’s racial prejudice in a more disguised way. The Premier’s failure to appreciate how the Bill reduced Southern Europeans’ access to the industry’s ‘resources and rewards’ – the ironic ‘fair deal’ – mirrored the deeply-entrenched bigotry against Southern Italians that the Report exposed. In fact, labelling these migrants as colluding with ‘trickery and subterfuge’ reinforced Ferry’s suspicions of an inferior criminally-inclined type. The new legislation posed extreme obstacles for Southern Europeans, even British subjects, whose small savings yet hard work were now stifled. It privileged the more established British-Australians or the older generation of Northern Italians. The obvious racism within the Ferry Report lends itself to



a wider frame of reference about the powerful salience of racialisation. It also poses questions about the persistence of systemic racism, not least against Southern Italians.

### Endnotes

The author thanks Mr Ian Bonaccorso, Dr Ruth Kerr and Dr Anne Monsour for discussions about aspects of this article. The author also thanks the anonymous peer reviewers for their advice and assistance.

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- 2 See: Ann Curthoys, 'An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous', in John Docker and Gerhard Fischer, eds, *Race, Colour & Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2000, pp. 22-8; Stephen Castles, Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis and Michael Morrissey, *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 1988, pp. 16-20; Ann Curthoys and Andrew Marcus, eds, *Who Are Our Enemies?: Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Neutral Bay, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, and The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1978; Michele Langfield, 'Attitudes to European immigration to Australia in the early twentieth century', *JIS*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1991, p. 13.
- 3 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 'Rethinking Racism: Towards a Structural Interpretation', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62, no. 3, June 1997, p. 469.
- 4 Commissioner TA Ferry, Queensland Alien Immigration Commission, 'Report of the Royal Commission appointed to Inquire into and Report on the Social and Economic Effect of Increase in Number of Aliens in North Queensland', Brisbane, Anthony James Cumming, 1925, p. 1.
- 5 Ross Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland from 1915 to the 1980s*, St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 1985, pp. 68-71. People such as Roman Catholic Archbishop James Duhig, Vance Palmer and Jean Devanny voiced their support. Cited in: William Douglass, *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland*, St Lucia, Qld, Queensland University Press, 1995, pp. 133-4; Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland*, Port Melbourne, Vic., Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 179.
- 6 MS, National Archives of Australia (NAA): B741, V/3477, copy of 'Greeks in Queensland. Criticism by Royal Commission. Consul General's Repudiation', *The Argus*, 9 June 1925. On Italian reactions, see: MS, NAA: A458, L156/3, letter to the Premier of Queensland from the Prime Minister, 8 April, 1925; Douglass, *From Italy*, pp. 145-7.
- 7 MS, NAA: A458, L156/3, copies of correspondence between the Prime Minister and the Premier of Queensland, 8 April 1925, 9 June 1925, 1 July 1925 and 7 July 1925.
- 8 MS, NAA: B741, V/3477, letter to the Attorney-General's Department, Investigation Branch, Melbourne, from the Attorney-General's Department, Investigation Branch, Brisbane, 11 June 1925.
- 9 See: WD Borrie, *Italians and Germans in Australia*, Melbourne, FW Cheshire, 1954, pp. 109-111; Charles Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 205-6.
- 10 Evans, *A History*, p. 176. See also: Douglass, *From Italy*, pp. 139, 145; Gianfranco Cresciani, 'Australia, Italy and Italians, 1845-1945', *Studi Emigrazione*, anno XX, n. 69, marzo 1983, p. 15; Fitzgerald, *A History*, pp. 70, 86.

- 11 Douglass, *From Italy*, pp. 132-43.
- 12 MS, NAA: A458, L156/3, telegram to the Prime Minister from the Premier of Queensland, 30 March 1925.
- 13 MS, NAA: A458, L156/3, telegram to the Prime Minister from the Premier of Queensland, 1 April 1925.
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- 15 Fitzgerald notes the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia, founded in 1916, the British Preference League of 1930, the Protestant Labor Party of 1937, and the Empire Protestant Defence League of 1939. Fitzgerald, *A History*, pp. 71, 111-12.
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- 31 Douglas Cole, 'The Crimson Thread of Kinship': Ethnic Ideas in Australia, 1890-1914', *Historical Studies*, vol. 14, no. 56, April 1971, p. 512.
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- 33 Cole, 'The Crimson Thread', p. 518.
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- 38 See the forthcoming: Catherine Dewhurst, 'The Anglo-Italian Treaty: Australia's imperial obligations to Italian migrants, 1883-1940', in Bruno Mascitelli and Gianfranco Cresciani (eds), *Italy and Australia: An Asymmetrical Relationship*, Ballarat, Vic: Connor Court Publishing, 2014.
- 39 Dewhurst, 'Collaborating', p. 38.
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- 41 Langfield, "White aliens", pp. 2-4.
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- 45 Ferry, 'Report', p. 2.
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- 47 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 4-5.
- 48 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 5-6.
- 49 Borrie, *Italians and Germans*, p. 51.
- 50 Cited in Ferry, 'Report', p. 6. Cantamessa protested against the exclusion of Italians from the sugar industry. Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien, 'Cantamessa, Ettore Giuseppe (1892-1947)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cantamessa-ettore-giuseppe-9686> [Accessed: 3 May, 2013].
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- 52 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 10-11.
- 53 Ferry, 'Report', p. 13.
- 54 Ferry, 'Report', p. 12.
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- 56 Ferry, 'Report', p. 15.
- 57 Ferry, 'Report', p. 17.
- 58 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 15, 16.
- 59 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 24, 25.
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- 62 Ferry, 'Report', p. 17.
- 63 Ferry, 'Report', p. 10.
- 64 Ferry, 'Report', p. 18.
- 65 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 18-19, 21.
- 66 See Price, *Southern Europeans*, pp. 26-32. On the different socio-economic patterns of Italian migrants' origins in the context of chain migrations, see MacDonald and MacDonald, 'Italian Migration', pp. 262-7.
- 67 Ferry, 'Report', p. 18.
- 68 See John Kerr, *Northern Outpost*, Mossman, Mossman Central Mill Company Limited, 1979, pp. 99-100. As Kerr points out: 'At first, some shares were allowed to be sold independently from the land, but to prevent the situation arising where the mill was controlled by those who were not farmers, the articles were amended in 1900 so that

- the shares remained attached to the land, and provision made to transfer shares back to the land they belonged to.' Kerr, *Northern Outpost*, p. 99.
- 69 Ferry, 'Report', pp. 24-6.
- 70 MS, NAA: B741, V/3477, copy of 'Objection to Aliens. Restrictions Advocated', *The Argus*, 4 June 1925.
- 71 Vance Palmer, 'Italians in North Queensland', *Punch* [Melbourne], 22 October 1925, p. 15.
- 72 Palmer, 'Italians', p. 27.
- 73 Jens Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia: Influence on Population and Progress*, Melbourne, Macmillan & Co. and Melbourne University Press, 1927, pp. 93-4.
- 74 Lyng, *Non-Britishers*, pp. 102-5.
- 75 MS, NAA: B741, V/3477, letter to the Attorney-General's Department, Investigation Branch, Melbourne, from the Attorney-General's Department, Investigation Branch, Brisbane, 11 June 1925. Ferry's recommendation that the Commonwealth record details about all migrants was considered too expensive.
- 76 MS, NAA: A981, TRE358, copy of "Gentlemen's Agreement".
- 77 'The Kalamia Dispute. Meeting Of A.W.U. Position Outlines', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 6 June 1933, p. 5.
- 78 'The Kalamia Dispute. Naturalised Subjects. Petition Prime Minister', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 27 June 1933, p. 5. See also MS, NAA: A981, TRE358, 'The Italian Question in Queensland – the "Gentlemen's Agreement"', from the Department of External Affairs, 31 October 1933, p. 1.
- 79 See 'In Parliament. Regulation Of Sugar Cane Prices Acts Amending Bill. Premier's Speech', *Cairns Post*, 9 December 1933, p. 5; *Queensland Parliamentary Debates* [QBD], vol. CLXIV, pp. 1796-8.
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- 82 "Against Italians", *The Courier Mail*, 6 December 1933, p. 10.
- 83 'In Parliament. Regulation Of Sugar Cane Prices Acts Amending Bill. Premier's Speech', *QPD*, vol. CLXIV, pp. 1796-8
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- 86 MS, NAA: A981, TRE358, letter to the Prime Minister from the Premier of Queensland, 8 January 1934.