

Capie, 2012a

Page 2. Early 20th-century fears

Before the 1970s most New Zealanders regarded Asia as an alien place whose large populations threatened to swamp relatively empty Australasia. This fear was reflected in racist immigration laws.

In 1881 New Zealand followed Australia, Canada and the United States in introducing restrictions on Chinese immigration. Chinese immigrants were forced to pay a poll tax of £10, increased to £100 in 1896.

Chinese were also subjected to language tests and other restrictions. One law required Chinese residents returning to New Zealand to provide thumbprints for identification. The Chinese consul in Wellington protested that this was degrading and humiliating.

The Russian scares

In 1885 the Anglo-Russian dispute in Afghanistan created one of many 'Russian scares' in New Zealand. Premier Robert Stout proposed raising a 1,000-man army for service in Afghanistan, but the crisis was defused before any action was taken. Coastal fortifications were built in several New Zealand cities as fears remained that Britain's Royal Navy could not defend the country against a possible Russian attack. Japan's victory in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese war all but vanquished 'Russophobia'. However, it increased New Zealanders' fears about Japan.

Disputes with Britain

Until the Second World War New Zealand was happy to leave most aspects of foreign relations to the British government. This led to disputes over Asian immigration laws.

In 1896 the New Zealand government tried to pass a law extending its Chinese poll tax to all 'Asiatics'. This would have included Japanese. The British government, which was cultivating closer relations with Japan, instructed the New Zealand governor to withhold royal assent from the bill.

Although Indian nationals were British subjects, New Zealand's Immigration Restriction Act 1899 placed an obstacle in their way by requiring them to complete an application form in a European language. Laws such as these in New Zealand and other British dominions drew complaints from the British government of India. The British worried that Indian protests against discriminatory immigration policies might fuel the growing independence movement in India.

In the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1920 New Zealand got around British concerns by removing any mention of race as grounds of admittance to the country. People of British birth or parentage were admitted, while all others had to apply to the minister of customs for a permit. The act defined Indians and other native 'Aboriginals' of British colonies as not of British birth, so they too needed a permit. Indians and other 'non-whites' were routinely turned down without explanation.

Chinese immigrants who were granted a permit still had to pay the poll tax. In vain the Chinese consul in Wellington protested over this provision, while the Chinese government protested directly to the British government in London.

Rugby in Asia, 1936

In 1936 the New Zealand Universities team became the first New Zealand rugby team to tour Japan. They won seven games, and drew against All Japan. The team also visited Hong Kong, beating the local team 26–0. The standard of Japanese rugby was higher than the visitors expected. They also noted the efficiency of the Japanese rail system and the modernity of Tokyo, with its elaborate neon lights. They observed that most Japanese men had adopted western dress, but women still wore the kimono.

The rise of Japan

The Anglo-Japanese alliance was signed in 1902 and lasted until 1923. New Zealanders were ambivalent about it. Britain's Royal Navy was no longer capable of maintaining a strong presence in the Pacific. Japan's growing power was shown by its victory over Russia in 1905 and annexation of Korea in 1910.

While New Zealand was happy with the support provided to the allies by the Japanese fleet during the First World War, there was a fear that Japan planned to move into the South Pacific. Despite these concerns, in 1928 New Zealand signed a trade treaty directly with Japan. This was the dominion's first bilateral trade agreement with a country that was not part of the British Empire.

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