

Question – Assess the claim that Australia was a working man’s paradise from 1890 to 1914

During the years of 1890 and 1914, the myth of the Australian “working man’s paradise” had become a key aspect of our national identity, overseas reputation and culture, and still is, after more than ninety years since this time period. This paper seeks to prove that Australia, during this period was a working man’s paradise due to the economic, social, political factors and worker’s rights. Using respected and reliable sources, this paper will assess the various aspects of the so called “working man’s paradise”, if we assume a working man’s paradise to mean a place that has better conditions for the **European, English speaking male** working population and show how the Australia of 1890 to 1914 was a working man’s paradise.

The working man’s paradise of the 1890 to 1914 period was truly a working **European, English speaking man’s** paradise. At this time in Australian history, women were considered below men and therefore had less wages and far less labour opportunities, because as Greig, Lewis and White (2003, p 198) states “their bodies were socially constructed as weaker”. They did not vote all across Australia until 1908, and even then they were considered to be mere housewives, ‘doing the domestic work’ (Greig, Lewis and White, 2003, p 78) and merely auxiliaries of the family. For the women who did work, they were paid substantially less money for working the same or more hours as men. As a result of this, until the Harvester Judgement, families were forced to live on less and so cut back on the ‘basic rights every Australian deserves’ (Museum Victoria: Harvester Judgement, 2007), therefore it was generally the women and children that suffered. These rights are specified in the paragraph about the Harvester Judgement on page 3.

Common jobs for women at the time were generally ‘house servants, general servants, housekeepers, cooks’ (McCloughlin, p. 79) but they were treated badly in these jobs and ruthless employers often exploited them because they were females.

Below is a source used to justify the Harvester Judgement, and show the predicament of one of the women of 1907, when the Harvester Judgement was introduced.

"I AM A MARRIED WOMAN LIVING WITH MY HUSBAND IN BAY ST, PORT MELBOURNE. WE LIVE IN A FIVE ROOMED BRICK HOUSE – TWO STORIES – AND NOT A GOOD HOUSE AT THAT. THERE IS A BATH AND COPPER IN A SHED IN THE YARD. WE HAVE NO BATHROOM. WE PAY 12/6 FOR IT.

'I DO NOT KNOW WHAT MY HUSBAND EARNS BUT HE GIVES ME £2-10-0. I SPEND IT ALL. THIS IS NOT ENOUGH TO KEEP THE FAMILY GOING. I COULD DO WITH MORE. I DO NOT RUN INTO DEBT BUT I SPEND IT ALL – I NEVER HAVE ANYTHING OVER. OUR WEEKLY EXPENDITURE VARIES. IF I HAVE A SHILLING OR TWO OVER I MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET AN ODD PAIR OF BOOTS FOR ONE OF THE CHILDREN NOW AND AGAIN. AT BEST OF TIMES IT WOULD ONLY BE A SHILLING OR TWO EITHER WAY.'

- KATE RUSSELL"

(Museum Victoria: Harvester Judgement, 2007)

Children were also considered below men and women, for obvious reasons. Despite the introduction of the free education system, many children of both genders left early to support their families further, though they were predictably only paid a fraction of the adult workers, and children were far easier to exploit, being cheated out of money and working more than eight hours a week. "Common jobs for children were street sweepers, labourers, workers in small factories and farm hands for boys, maids, washing and child minding for girls", as indicated by Australian Childhood – Changes over 200 years – Teacher's guide (1994).

In this time period, race certainly was an issue. Although Thompson (1994) indicates 'Australia did and still does see itself as an egalitarian society,' at this time Australia had adopted a racial hierarchy which meant that, "certain races including Aborigines

were barely human and the white race was at the apex” (Thompson 1994, p. 33). A famous piece of legislation called the White Australia policy or Immigration Restriction act was specifically designed to keep non – European immigrants out of the country. This was usually done by the use of a very difficult dictation test in any European language, not necessarily English, that in theory could be given to any immigrant but in practice was only given to non Europeans, as indicated by Immigration and Nation Building (2001). In a nutshell, “This meant that potential migrants who were 'undesirable' by virtue of their nationality or race were not directly ousted on the grounds of their race; officially, it was only because of their language skills that they were not allowed.” (Immigration and Nation Building – Events, 2001) For the few non – Europeans who passed this test, they were subject to the racism of the Australian population as indicated by Thompson (1994), so Australia was generally not a Working Man’s paradise for non Europeans.

During 1890, the world suffered greatly from an economic recession and Australia was no exception, but compared to the rest of the world, “Australia was at this time one of the most socially progressive countries in the world (Mason, 2007). Some historians have suggested that although the conditions for the working class in Australia were very hard compared with today, “Australia did in fact lead the world when it came to worker’s rights and conditions” (Mason, 2007). During the 1890s trade unions had become increasingly more powerful and influential, with unions for factory workers, miners and others. As more immigrants came into Australia, the issues of the working class became far more important and, though the unions had to employ strikes and other tactics to get what they wanted, Australian workers had higher wages and more fringe benefits than overseas workers, including maternity allowances, workers compensation, and increased leisure time meant that the average Australian male adult worker was well and truly in his version of paradise. The 1890s were a troublesome time for Australia, but the Working Man did well.

The depression was a shocking experience for the Australian colonies that added considerable weight to the argument for federation, baring the inefficiencies of the separate colonies for the colonial layperson to see. In 1901, a proposal was agreed to, after more than 20 years of debate, as indicated by 1890 – 1900 – Towards Federation, 2008, which brought all the colonies of the Australian Continent under the Australian Commonwealth. A new constitution was made, and all the inefficient taxes that were set in place when one moved intercolony were waived. This was a major win for the Working Man's Paradise because it made moving around easier and the "working man's paradise" now had a more concrete meaning – the Working Man's Paradise was no longer 7 colonies, it was a country called Australia. Meanwhile, rumours of this new working man's paradise called Australia were skirting around the world's major overcrowded cities and towns like England, Asia and the slums of America, and soon many "working men" were flocking to our shores.

During the early 1900s, the depression ended and other countries began to pick up their game. However, Australia still had extensively better conditions in many ways, as indicated by Mason (2007). Even more new legislation was introduced to allow more old age pensions, factory acts, health acts across Australia. Two pieces of legislation in particular, called the Harvester Judgement and the introduction of the Eight Hour Working Day Australia-wide made life much more affordable for the retired and drastically improved conditions for the average Australian male worker.

The Harvester Judgement was passed in 1907, "when the President of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, was concerned that some Australian workers were not paid enough to buy food to sustain their families" (Fact Sheet, ACTU, nd). This was the first wage regulating system in Australia and a landmark moment for the Working Man's Paradise slogan. The Harvester Judgement revolved around the basic rights for every Australian, and was designed so that any and every worker had the money to keep his wife and children afloat with the basic

rights that every Australian deserved. According to Mackay, the leader of the movement, these included “civilised habits, frugal comforts, decent shelter, partitioned rooms, fresh air, water to wash in, enough wholesome food and provision for ‘rainy days’” (Fact Sheet, ACTU, nd). This was the decision to make the minimum wage 2 pounds, 2 shillings per week. The Harvester judgement said that “every Australian was entitled to every single one of these standards, every day of their lives and that if we as a nation did not endorse this, we could not claim to be a civilised society.”(Fact Sheet, ACTU, nd) The primary source in red on page 1 was one of the sources Mackay used to justify his 2 pounds, 2 shillings minimum wage.

Mason (2007) indicates that throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australia had one of the world’s finest working times. At this time, most overseas workers worked long hours for little pay, and ‘the Eight Hour day deal that was struck between the stonemasons of Victoria and the Colonial government in the 1850s became Australia wide, meaning that employers could not force citizens to work more than eight hours a day, due to the Australian heat which often was as high as 40 degrees C’ (Eight Hour Day ,2006). ‘Certain employers tried to resist the movement, but they were met with immediate strikes they were unaccustomed to and forced to obey the wishes of their employees’. This contributed greatly to the Australian Working Man’s Paradise.

In conclusion, if we assume that a working man was an adult, European, English speaking male, then Australia was a working man’s paradise due to the superiority of its working conditions, economic factors and superior wages compared to the rest of the world.

References:

Books

Greig, A, Lewins, FW & White, K 2003, *Inequality in Australia*, Cambridge university Press, Cambridge

This book was interesting to read and contained chapters on gender equality, race equality and egalitarian society, all of which were useful and full of ideas that I had never come across before. It helped me to understand and explain the nature of the social attitudes to race and gender in the period 1890 – 1914.

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McClaughlin, T 1998, *Irish Women in Colonial Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

This book had little information that I actually needed, but it was good background reading and had good information on the occupations of colonial women.

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Thompson, E 1994, *Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW

This source was useful to me because it showed me what the attitudes of the time were to women, Indigenous and non – European people. The author teaches political science at UNSW and for this reason I believe this source is reliable.

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Mason, J 2007, *Experience of Nationhood: Modern Australia since 1901*, McGraw-Hill, North Ryde, NSW

This source was very useful to me because it contained information about the different classes, Australia's standing among other countries in the subject of working conditions and as the impact of trade unions on the Australian work force. I know it is a respectable source as it is the textbook for my school.

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### Websites

Museum Victoria 2007, Museum Victoria: Harvester Judgement viewed 28/3/09, <<http://museumvictoria.com.au/About/MV-News/2007/Harvester-Judgment/>>

This website was extremely useful as it included a concise overview about the Harvester Judgement, including a primary source about the conditions for working families in this time period. I trust this source, and would recommend it to anyone doing a similar assignment as it is the only one I have been able to find with a word – for – word testimony of the conditions for working families. It is made by the museum of Victoria and therefore I believe it is reliable.

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MARCOM Projects 1994, 6MAAC.pdf viewed 28/3/09, <<http://www.marcom.com.au/SGuides/6MAAC.pdf>>

This website was actually a teaching guide for year six teachers teaching students about the changes in childhood in the last two hundred years in Australia. It was mainly questions, but it did tell me what the jobs were for children in the time period. I believe this source is reliable because it comes from a common teacher's source.

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Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2001, Immigration and Nation Building - Events viewed 28/3/09, <[http://www.abc.net.au/federation/fedstory/ep2/ep2\\_places.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/federation/fedstory/ep2/ep2_places.htm)>

This website was useful to me as it had detailed information on the method of exclusion employed by the White Australia Policy, specifically the use of the dictation test. It is created by the ABC, a reliable source.

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Parliament of New South Wales 2008, 1890 to 1900 - Towards Federation - NSW

Parliament viewed 28/3/09,

<<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/common.nsf/key/HistoryTowardsFederation>>

This website gave me a detailed overview of Australian history, from 1890 to 1900. It is reliable as it is endorsed by the parliament of NSW, but largely did not relate to the Working Man's Paradise.

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8Hour Day 2006, Eight Hour Day - The Eight Hour Day 1856-2006 viewed 28/3/09,

<<http://www.8hourday.org.au/history.asp>>

This website was a useful website as it explained to me the 8 hour working day act, crucial to the Working Man's Paradise debate. Although it does not seem to be made by anyone respected, it corresponds with other sources I have seen.