

5.2 Post-war Australia

During the 1930s, Australia had suffered a depression that, at its peak, saw 32 per cent of people out of work. Whole neighbourhoods turned into slums. Then war hit, and the country was plunged into a six-year battle that saw the mainland bombed by the Japanese and enemy submarines make it into Sydney Harbour. Australians, who had always felt great solidarity with the English, found themselves relying upon America for protection while England fought to defend itself against attack from Nazi Germany. This was a time of fear for many Australians: fear of poverty, fear of invasion, and fear that they would never be reunited with their loved ones. When the war ended in 1945, Australia rejoiced, but the soldiers returned to a country that still faced years of hardship.

Populate or perish

The Australia to which the soldiers returned could no longer take its security for granted. The government, and many people, believed that the only protection against foreign invaders was to dramatically increase the population, which at the time stood at only 7 million. Pressure was on to increase the population, which would mean taking immigrants at an unprecedented rate. While many Australians recognised the need to

populate the country, others feared that this would lead to a flood of undesirable immigrants entering the country. The government of the day reassured the populace that only the most suitable immigrants would be chosen and began recruiting Europeans who had been displaced by the war, such as 'the beautiful Balts' (see **Source 2**). With an influx of immigrants ready to work, the country began building major infrastructure projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme. These projects were designed

to improve the lives of regular Australians, to supply new suburbs with much-needed power and to make a statement: Australia was on the move.

It's (still) a man's world

During the war, many women had found work in industries such as munitions production and nursing, and in the Women's Land Army. Undertaking this work gave many women a new-found sense of independence and pride. When the men returned from war, however, women were expected to vacate their positions and resume their duties at home. Those who chose to stay were usually given a lower wage than their male counterparts. In 1949–50, the National Council of Women and the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Clubs petitioned for women to receive equal pay, and they were granted 75 per cent of what a man would earn to undertake the same job. It would be the late 1960s before Australian women would be granted equal pay for equal work, and the 1980s before they would be legally protected from harassment in the workplace.

Prosperity at last

As the 1950s began, unemployment was down, manufacturing was up, and the economy was growing steadily. Despite the recent influx of migrants, Australia was still a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon society, in which the majority of people sought

Source 2 One campaign designed to reassure Australians of immigrants' suitability involved offering residency to blond, blue-eyed members of the Baltic states, who were referred to as 'the beautiful Balts'. This photograph of Baltic immigrants was taken in Victoria in 1948.



entertainment in film; bonded over sport and community events such as dinner-dances and church services; and learned about current affairs from radio, newspapers and the *Movietone news*. When this generation finally 'settled down', it was in comfortable, purpose-built suburbs, with quarter-acre blocks complete with a driveway for a new car. Women were not encouraged to work outside the home,

Source 3 In 1954, Queen Elizabeth II became the first monarch to tour Australia. At this time, the majority of Australians still considered themselves loyal subjects of the British crown. Around eight million people turned out to see the Queen during her visit.



but affordable whitegoods, vacuum cleaners and other products promised to make domestic chores less tedious. With this relative peace and prosperity as a backdrop, babies were born in record numbers, leading to a 'baby boom'.

The stability could not last forever. In the coming decades, world politics would once again throw the country into political turmoil, while advances in communications technology would introduce 'baby boomers' to a flood of American popular culture. The combination of these factors would cause many to question the social and political views of their parents, the nation's loyalty to its English roots and the very notion of what it meant to be 'Australian'.

Activities

Student workbook
5.1

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- Using a large piece of cardboard or paper, create a popular culture concept map that you will maintain during your study of this chapter. Break your map down into six categories: music, film/television, fashion, food, sport and beliefs/culture. As you read through this and other spreads, add interesting or significant information that you learn. For example, for the beliefs/culture concept, you might write, 'Late 1960s — Australian women legally granted equal pay for equal work'.

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- Describe the living conditions for the mother and daughter shown in **Source 1**. What other kinds of evidence would you need to decide whether or not this photograph is an accurate representation of the living conditions for working class people during the 1940s?
- Source 2** depicts a group of 'beautiful Balts'. What did this immigration campaign suggest about the values of Australia's citizens at the time?
- Source 3** depicts Australians lining the streets to see the Queen on her first royal visit. What can you tell about Australians at this time from this image alone?
- Based on the information in this spread, briefly explain what life was like for the following groups of people during the period of post-war Australia:
 - men
 - women
 - children.

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

- View the Brotherhood of St Lawrence's documentary *Beautiful Melbourne* (1947) in your eBookPLUS. The documentary reveals the difficult living conditions for families living in Melbourne suburbs like Fitzroy and Carlton. Then use your school library and the internet to study another suburb in the years 1945–54. It might be a suburb that you live in, or one that you enjoy visiting today. Examine different aspects of the suburb, such as its socioeconomic status, or any significant events that occurred during this time. Then compile your findings as a PowerPoint to share with the class.

Source 1 During the 1930s and 1940s, rising rental prices in Melbourne and Sydney combined with a shortage of available housing to turn inner-city suburbs into slums. This photograph shows a mother and daughter living in a caravan at McMahon's Point, a working class section of Sydney, in 1947.

