In the 30 years following World War II, Australia underwent an amazing transformation. This monocultural British society – which in 1947 was almost 90 per cent Anglo-Celtic, and which had effectively marginalized its remaining Aboriginal, non-British and non-European inhabitants – successfully absorbed over three million migrants and their children, only 40 per cent of whom came from Britain. It officially redefined itself as a ‘multicultural’ rather than a ‘homogeneous’ society, and demolished the edifice of legislative and administrative discrimination which had both reflected and sustained its image of itself as an essentially British society. It also reconceptualized its notion of citizenship. The culturally normative understanding of the term as a status which bestowed the ‘privileges’ and ‘benefits’ of a British subject was replaced by 1975 with a conception of citizenship as the equal rights and obligations associated with belonging to Australia’s increasingly diverse community, in the context of a number of major international agreements on human rights which Australia had signed by then.1

These profound changes owed nothing to democratic debate on, or academic analysis of, the issues of citizenship and national identity. The Australian government was confronted with the need to create the legal status of ‘Australian citizen’ following Canada’s creation of a separate Canadian citizenship. A submission was put to cabinet in late 1945 recommending that, at the conference of experts on nationality to be held in London in February 1947, Australia should support the principles embodied in the Canadian Citizenship Act 1947. This was the first law passed in any Commonwealth country to create a citizenship separate from that of British subject. The Australian Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948 was, therefore, not
inspired by political pressure to assert a separate identity from that of Britain.

Responsible administrators were far from clear about what Australian citizenship actually signified. In 1953 the Secretary of the Department of Immigration, Tasman Heyes, asked his department to clarify the difference between Australian citizenship and British subject status. The task was quite beyond them. At Heyes’ request, the desirability of having a charter of Australian citizenship was put before the community leaders who comprised the 1955 Citizenship Convention. They were similarly baffled and passed the ball back to the Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, who dropped it into the too-hard basket where it stayed for many years. This lack of thinking about the meaning of Australian citizenship did not mean that no changes occurred, or that they can be solely attributed to the election of the Labor government in 1972 which accelerated and formally acknowledged a gradual process which had been taking place since the 1950s.²

This process was the unintended result of a very large number of practical decisions which had to be made to implement the determination of all postwar governments that migrants, seen to be essential to Australia’s economic development, should be absorbed into society. The centralization within the one Commonwealth department of the three major immigration-related functions – regulation of the entry of people, management of their settlement into the host community, and their acceptance as citizens – allowed a degree of coordination not possible in many other migrant-receiving countries. It was soon understood, however, that no single government department could have met the many needs of such a large and culturally diverse migrant intake.³

As increased prosperity within the European Economic Community in the 1960s made emigration to distant Australia a less attractive prospect, the government sought immigrants from new sources such as Turkey, Lebanon and parts of Asia in order to maintain its high intake goals. In the process it unintentionally undermined the White Australia policy, the longstanding bulwark erected at Federation to preserve the perceived racial and cultural ‘homogeneity’ of the Australian nation. The policy had, however, been weakened by a series of administrative decisions since World War II.