

AUSTRALIA'S PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE AT THE EVIAN CONFERENCE: INTEGRITY OR SHAME?

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This article outlines and assesses the contribution made by the Commonwealth of Australia to the Evian Conference of July 1938. The attitude of the Australian government, it will be shown, was ambivalent from the start, with the Commonwealth not even prepared to attend unless Britain also attended. Having then made the commitment to send a representative to Evian, the Australian government chose a man who was neither an immigration expert nor a man with any foreign affairs expertise. Thomas (later Sir Thomas) White, the Australian Minister for Trade and Customs, was a senior minister in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, but the experience required for the task of representing Australia at a gathering such as Evian was simply beyond him. The legalistic and unsympathetic stance he adopted led to despair for many of the Jewish delegates at Evian. Upon elected to the chairmanship of one of the two sub-committees set up at the conference, White employed his position to treat the Jewish delegates with utter contempt. His record at the conference, lauded by many of the officials who were present, was one of the least humanitarian of any that can be attributed to Australian statesmen—hardly a ringing endorsement of Australia's record at this crucial gathering in which the Commonwealth sought, at an early stage, to express itself as an autonomous nation on the international stage.

Key words: Australia, Holocaust, Commonwealth, Jews, British Foreign Office, United States, Evian Conference.

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In March 1938 the government of the United States invited a number of countries to gather together for the purpose of «facilitating the emigration from Austria, and presumably from Germany, of political refugees»¹. The Commonwealth of Australia was among those invited. Sent initially to the British Foreign Office and dated March 24, 1938, the invitation asked whether «the British Government (on its own behalf or on behalf of the self-governing Dominions) [would] be willing to cooperate with the Government of the United States in setting up a Special Committee composed of representatives of a number of Governments»². The motivation of the United States in calling this meeting, the memorandum stated, was «the urgency of the problem with which the world is faced and the necessity of speedy cooperative effort under Government supervision if widespread human suffering is to be averted»³.

This article considers the role and performance of Australia at the conference—an early situation in which Australia not only acted as a fully sovereign state, but also where it identified the refugee issue as one that was vital for Australia's future.

The immediate response of the British Foreign Office to the U.S. invitation was expressed by a senior official, Roger Makins. Considering America's long postwar tradition of isolationism, Makins minuted that «it is on general grounds desirable to encourage and support any United States proposal involving American interest in European affairs and any inclination to co-operate with foreign governments, however 'half-baked' a particular proposal may in its inception appear»⁴. His major misgiving was that the proposed conference could encourage the German government to aggravate its persecution against the Jews if it was shown that the countries of the world were prepared to open their doors to refugees. And not only the German government: «Other European countries with surplus populations, and particularly Poland and Roumania, may well intensify the persecution of Jews and others whom they do not want in the hope of getting rid of them through the good offices of the [proposed] committee»⁵. Makins's conclusion was that «Unless great caution is exercised, the constitution of the committee may therefore intensify the pressure on the Jews in Europe, and make the refugee problem even worse than it is at present»⁶. He stressed, however, that the British Empire «should as far as possible present a united front in regard to this question;» for this reason «we ought to urge the Dominions to do all they can to bring this about»⁷.

The Australian government first heard officially about the American proposal when R.A. Wiseman of the Dominions Office sent a letter to the Australian High Commissioner in London, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, on April 1, 1938. The actual suggestion that Australia had been invited was worded strangely. Informing Bruce

¹ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (henceforth TNA), DO 35, file 716/M576/1, memorandum to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, from the Embassy of the United States. London, 24.03.1938.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ TNA, FO 371, file 22321, minute by R.M. Makins (Foreign Office), 25.03.1938.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

that the United States had invited Britain and other European and American countries (as well as Canada, South Africa, and Ireland, which had independent diplomatic contact with the United States), Wiseman then asked «what reply His Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth of Australia would wish to be returned to the invitation made to them by the United States Government?»⁸ The invitation and a request for a response to it were thus issued simultaneously. Wiseman wrote that the British government was favorably disposed to the idea of a gathering on German refugees.

Bruce wired Prime Minister Joseph Lyons in Canberra his advice that Australia should attend the conference⁹, informing Lyons that delegates would be nominated by the attending governments and that any financing of emergency migration «would be undertaken by private organizations within the respective countries». Furthermore—and possibly this was the most attractive feature of the American proposal—«no country would be expected to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation»¹⁰. Australia would certainly not be going out on a limb if it agreed to participate, as France, Sweden, and five Latin American countries had already agreed to join with the United States in the new committee, «prompted by [the] urgency of [the] problem and [a] desire to avert widespread human suffering».¹¹

A cable sent from Lyons to Bruce on April 8 showed that Australia's attitude had already been decided upon; it was prepared to attend, Lyons wrote, but only on the understanding that Britain also be represented. Moreover, only after receipt of news indicating Britain's participation would Bruce be permitted to accept the American invitation¹². A Cabinet decision, it was influenced strongly by Lyons himself¹³. The Prime Minister's views on the matter were thus clear: when the circumstances surrounding Australia's participation had been finalized, he wrote, the Commonwealth representative would be instructed along the following lines:

[N]o special facilities can be granted for the admission of groups of Jewish migrants whether from Germany or Austria, ... [and] each case will be considered on its merits on application in the usual form being submitted to the Department of the Interior; ... [T]he representative on the Committee will be informed that we are ready to receive applications for permits from non-Jewish Austrians [sic], but that these applications will be subject to the present policy and rules regulating migration to Australia;

⁸ TNA, DO 35, file 716/M576/1, R.A. Wiseman (Dominions Office) to the High Commissioner for Australia, London, April 1, 1938.

⁹ National Archives of Australia (henceforth NAA), A461, file M349/3/5, Part 1, «Jews—Policy Part 1», cablegram from S.M. Bruce to Prime Minister J.A. Lyons, April 5, 1938 (received April 6, 1938).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. As it turned out, by early April the nations that had agreed to attend included Belgium, France, Sweden, Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador, and Uruguay (TNA, FO 371, file 21748, C.R. Price (Dominions Office) to the Official Secretary, Australia House, April 8, 1938). By the time the conference took place in July 1938, fifteen other countries plus the USA and Britain had joined them.

¹² NAA A461, file M349/3/5 Part 1, «Jews—Policy Part 1», cablegram from J.A. Lyons to S.M. Bruce, April 8, 1938.

¹³ NAA A445, file 235/5/2 Part 2, «Admission of Jews Policy Part 2», memorandum from Frank Strahan, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, to Secretary, Department of the Interior, April 8, 1938.

there will in all cases be customary safeguards that admission will not be detrimental to Australian workers¹⁴.

These instructions were for Bruce's «personal information only at present»¹⁵ there was much to be done before the conference began.

For its part, the United States Embassy in London remained unsure about Australia's attendance as late as May 26¹⁶. By now, however, the date and place of the proposed meeting had been set: it was to take place at the Royal Hotel in the French resort town of Evian-les-Bains from July 6 onwards, and was henceforth to be referred to as an «Inter-Governmental Committee» rather than a conference or meeting¹⁷. (Most people, however, persisted in referring to it as the «Evian Conference», and the name stuck).

While the Americans had not been officially informed of Australia's participation, neither had the Australian people; they had to wait, in fact, until June 15. In response to a question in Parliament from the Member for Bourke, Maurice Blackburn, Prime Minister Lyons informed the House of Representatives that Australia had received an invitation from the United States government to participate in the establishment of a committee «to facilitate the migration from Austria of political refugees». (No mention was made of Germany or of the German annexation of Austria the previous March.) The government had decided, Lyons said, «to be represented on the committee», though the question of who was going to be Australia's representative had not yet been decided¹⁸. This was, officially, the first time the Australian people had heard either of the meeting or of Australia's intended participation in it. The bureaucracy, on the other hand, had been working on the conference details behind the scenes, and a good deal of planning activity had already taken place prior to Lyons making his announcement in Parliament.

Activity had also been taking place in London, where at a British interdepartmental meeting on June 8 the Foreign Office informed officials from other departments that Australia would be represented at the conference—but that prospects for attendance by the other Dominions were discouraging. The question that naturally arose was whether the British government should request the Dominion governments «to co-operate at Evian» for «on broad grounds of policy it is undesirable that the Dominions should not appear interested or willing to assist in this problem¹⁹». R.A. Wiseman of the Dominions Office stated unequivocally that such an approach was out of the question. It was, he said, not possible for the British government to influence the Dominions' attitude²⁰. Makins responded from the point of view of the external implications for Britain and the Empire, saying that the United States Government probably

¹⁴ NAA A461, file M349/3/5 Part 1, «Jews—Policy Part 1», cablegram from J.A. Lyons to S.M. Bruce, 08, 1938.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ TNA, FO 371, file 21748, Herschel V. Johnson (Counsellor, Embassy of the United States of America, London) to Viscount Halifax (Foreign Secretary, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom), 26.05.1938.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 15.06.1938, vol. 156, p. 2170.

¹⁹ TNA, FO 371, file 21749, Foreign Office minute by Roger Makins, 13.06.1938.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, from the record of the interdepartmental committee meeting held at the Foreign Office on 08.06.1938.

regarded the British Empire as in a position to make an important contribution to the problem, but it seemed that not only could the Empire make no adequate contribution, but that only one or two Dominions would even be represented at the conference. It would be open to the United States to criticise very strongly this negative response to their initiative and to attribute to it any blame that may accrue from a possible failure of the meeting²¹.

The fundamental position of the Dominions Office had already been expressed in an earlier meeting, when a comment was made that «it is best for us, while helping unofficially in any way in our power, to keep out of anything which looks like intervention with the Dominion governments».²² The Dominions framed and executed their policies independently of Britain, and immigration was viewed as a domestic rather than an external matter. Uninvited British intervention would be held as an unwarranted intrusion on their sovereignty.

In the long run, it seems that some good may have come out of these discussion, however; South Africa did not attend, but Australia, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand did—a significant improvement over just Australia²³.

As July 6 drew closer, Australian activity in Canberra and London intensified, until the final matter—the composition of the Australia delegation—was addressed. The team would essentially be assembled from diplomatic staff serving in the United Kingdom, but it was to be led by the Federal Minister for Trade and Customs, Thomas Walter (later Sir Thomas) White, who was at that time in London on other business. His advisers were Alfred Stirling (External Affairs Officer, Department of External Affairs, based at London), and A.W. Stuart-Smith (Australia House, London); his Private Secretary was Mrs. M. Grant. White arrived at Evian on the evening of July 5, having flown that day from Berlin; the other members of the delegation left from London the day before, and arrived at Evian in time to greet the Minister.

The man chosen to represent Australia was to some extent a default candidate. He was already in London to attend a trade conference, and to many people High Commissioner Stanley Melbourne Bruce (a former Prime Minister) would have been a more natural choice as Australia's representative. But early on Bruce had declined to recommend himself as a delegate, preferring to work from London in a liaison capacity.

White's qualifications as a civic and military leader in interwar Australia were without match. He had served in the Great War as an airman with the Australian Flying Corps (the forerunner of the Royal Australian Air Force); twice mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, he had been captured by the Turks near Baghdad in November 1915 and escaped by way of Russia in August 1918. He was a founder of the Australia Aero Club in 1914 and its Federal Chairman between

²¹ Ibid.

²² TNA, DO 35, file 705/M529/20, Dominions Office minute for Secretary of State, 27.05.1938.

²³ Very little work of a comparative nature has been done on the refugee policies of the British Dominions at the time of the Evian Conference. A beginning can be found in Paul R. Bartrop's works [5; 14]. The attitudes and policies of the other Dominions can be found only in specialist works focusing on the individual countries. See, for example, the following: [1; 4; 8; 9; 16].

1925 and 1927; he was also elected as Federal President of the Royal Life Saving Society in 1925, and President of the Melbourne Legacy Club (for the welfare of returned ex-servicemen and their families) in the same year. He commanded the 6th Battalion (Royal Melbourne Regiment) between 1926 and 1931 and held the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel between 1926 and 1939. His wife, Vera, was a daughter of Australia's second Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin. White had served as the parliamentary Member for the Melbourne electorate of Balaclava since 1929 and had held the Portfolio of Trade and Customs since 1933 [18]. Although the matters to be discussed at Evian did not directly concern his department, he was nonetheless senior enough in the Cabinet to have been expected to perform with authority in putting forth the government's line.

Hopes for the success of the conference were high in some circles prior to its opening. As early as April 7, Norman Bentwich, Professor of Law and a leading figure in the Council for German Jewry in London, had said to Roger Makins that «as regards the British Empire his main hopes were now centered on Australia and New Zealand», and these hopes might be realized at Evian²⁴. He recalled later that Australia had become a «blessed word» for the victims of persecution in Europe, and this image was to be reinforced often by numerous other commentators and public figures [11].

However, hopes for the success of the conference ran high among only a limited few within Australia itself. One was Colonel Harold Cohen, a leading Melbourne Jew and Member for Caulfield in the Victorian Parliament. On 7 July he said that out of an overall Australian population of seven-and-a-half million «a few thousand people of high technical knowledge, most of whom had means», would present little problem of absorption²⁵: people of the type described did not remain a self-contained community as did some of the European nationalities. No one had more reason to be a loyal Australian, or to desire to serve the community in which he lived, than had a British citizen of the Jewish faith, and there were innumerable examples in Australia of effective public service rendered by such people²⁶.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking comment came from the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the opening day of the conference, July 6:

«The test of the sincerity of international sympathy with the refugees and would-be refugees will come when the conference is invited to consider what practical steps can be taken to succour them. Pious resolutions will not help the distressed or deliver the oppressed from the hands of the persecutor. They must be given sanctuary in new lands and assistance to reach those lands. How far are the nations represented at Evian prepared to go?»²⁷

On Australia's participation, the *Herald* was even more forthright:

Are we in Australia, for example—to bring the question right home—ready to adopt a generous policy regarding the admission of the thousands of Austro-German

²⁴ TNA, FO 371, file 21748, Foreign Office minute by Roger Makins, 07.04.1938.

²⁵ Argus, 08.07.1938, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 06.07.1938, p. 16.

refugees who are clamouring to come to these shores? ... over-nicety ... must defeat the whole purpose of the Evian Conference, and expose the delegations to the Nazi taunt that democratic commiseration with and championship of persecuted peoples stop short of giving them the only kind of sympathy and support that counts.

«Why should» the *Herald* asked, «the rest of the world ... burden itself with the consequences of Germany's barbaric treatment of the Jews?» The answer was clear: because the Nazi pursuit of «these unfortunate people» was one to «excite the indignant contempt of all liberal-minded peoples». Germany's actions were «entirely indefensible», and it mattered greatly that «something should be done to relieve the sufferings of the victims of malice and misfortune»²⁸. It remained to be seen, of course, whether the attitude of the *Sydney Morning Herald* would be also that of the Australian government.

On the opening morning of the conference Thomas White sought out the representatives of the United Kingdom and the other Dominions, and a short consultation took place between them²⁹. It will never be entirely clear what was discussed, though it may be surmised that a general exchange of information, rather than a deliberation over tactics, took place. And information was necessary in the circumstances: it has been recorded that «even when the Government representatives had already gathered at Evian there was very little information forthcoming as to the Agenda of the Conference and its specific aims³⁰». A measure of uncertainty prevailed as to «whether the Conference would take in not only the actual problem of German and Austrian refugees ..., but the potential problem as it existed in Poland, Roumania, and Hungary and also of course in such other countries as Spain³¹». There was clearly a great deal of which the delegates had to become apprised before the conference actually got under way, and the Dominion representatives sought to create a unified stance from the outset.

The plenary meeting of the conference took place later that morning. The French delegate, Henry Bérenger, took the chair as host in order to welcome representatives of the thirty-two nations attending. Speeches of welcome then followed from the American and British representatives, after which the conference then proceeded to hear statements from the various delegates. The representatives quickly got to the point, and it was not long before the gist of the conference was made clear: all countries understood the need for international co-operation, «but in almost every instance it was pointed out that the opportunity for absorbing refugees was limited owing to economic conditions³²». The countries represented at Evian were unable, or unwilling, to agree to anything like mass migration. Some countries—particularly those from Latin

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ NAA, A434, file 50/3/41837, «Refugees from Austria: Special Committee Proposed by U.S.A., Evian», High Commissioner's Office, London, to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 13.07.1938.

³⁰ Board of Deputies of British Jews Archives, file E3/282/1, «Inter-Governmental Conference on Refugees Held at Evian, 06.07.1938», unsigned report by Norman Bentwich (henceforth «Board of Deputies Evian Report»). As it turned out the Agenda was prepared in the United States and taken to Evian; there was no prior consultation as to what the Agenda would contain.

³¹ Ibid.

³² NAA, A434, file 50/3/41837, «Refugees from Austria: Special Committee Proposed by U.S.A., Evian», Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees held at Evian, 6-15.07.1938: Summary of Proceedings.

America—indicated a willingness to accept agricultural refugees or those who could bring a degree of wealth with them; others agreed to consider plans for refugee settlement in rural colonies only. It appeared, in the words of one observer, as though all these expressions «had been prepared for ‘home consumption’ as well as with an eye to public opinion abroad, and that consequently delegates had refrained as far as possible from making any specific commitments³³». The United States did nothing more than publicly affirm its already existing annual quota of 27,370 Germans and Austrians, a figure that had to include non-refugee German immigrants and non-Jewish refugees, as well as Jews. The British government had misgivings about the whole conference, and much preferred to utilize the already existing League of Nations High Commission for Refugees. It was also wary about drawing too much attention to the refugee problem in case the delegates assembled at Evian began to make disquieting noises about Palestine as a Jewish haven. Indeed, British concern over Palestine led to an insistence on the part of the British delegation that the President of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, not be permitted to address the delegates, even privately [15, p. 202]. The issue of Palestine was one on which the British preferred to avoid discussion altogether.

Australia soon had its chance to make a statement, Thomas White speaking on the second day. The thrust of his speech was largely the same as that of the other representatives. He drew the conference’s attention to the special position of the Dominions in relation to Britain, expressing the view that they were «free partners in the British Commonwealth and arbiters of their own economies and national destinies». He continued that «Australia has her own particular difficulties», and that, where migration played any part in easing those difficulties, the only type to be countenanced was *British* migration. Despite this, he said, the government had, over recent years, given much consideration to «the problem of foreign migration». With this in mind and recognizing «the unhappy plight» of Jews in Germany and Austria, «they have been included on a pro rata basis, which we venture to think is comparable with that of any other country». He then added words that have since become infamous:

Under the circumstances, Australia cannot do more, for it will be appreciated that in a young country man power from the source from which most of its citizens have come is preferred, while undue privileges cannot be given to one particular class of non-British subject without injustice to others. It will no doubt be appreciated also that, as we have no real racial problems, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign migration³⁴.

The speech continued for another few minutes, but it could easily have stopped there. White had effectively declared Australia to be out of bounds for Jewish refugees.

His comments greatly disillusioned Jewish observers and representatives of various organizations assembled at Evian. Australia would never, it was felt, find cause to

³³ Board of Deputies Evian Report.

³⁴ NAA, A434, file 50/2/41837, «Refugees from Austria: Special Committee Proposed by U.S.A., Evian», Speech by Lieut.-Colonel the Honourable T.W. White, Delegate for Australia at Evian-les-Bains Conference on 7th July 1938.

admit Jews. White had even placed Jewish refugees in the same category as general non-British immigrants, as if the same motivations for emigration (and therefore the same criteria for acceptance) should apply. This is perhaps not to be wondered at, given that Australia did not have a distinct refugee policy at the outset of the crisis, and only haphazardly improvised one during 1938 itself. And while White might not have known much about Australia's migration policy, he certainly knew that no special considerations were being provided for Jewish entry. His final words demonstrated the extent to which Australia was prepared to go:

«What the United Kingdom is doing, together with our own efforts and those of others already related, will probably, we trust, encourage members of this inter-governmental committee here assembled to formulate further plans for cooperation towards the solution of a tragic world problem and thus bring hope to many unhappy people»³⁵.

This excluded the fact that Australia's «efforts» were directed towards keeping Jews out, rather than letting them in; that no «further» plans could be formulated, because no initial plans had been devised; and that no «co-operation towards the solution» of the refugee problem had been achieved because the delegates, more concerned with stating what their countries could not do rather than what they could do, had hardly created an environment conducive to practical international co-operation.

Responses to White's comments were scattered through the Australian press in the days following. The populist *Bulletin*, for example, applauded his stance, claiming that the «great majority» of Australians would approve of his statement and would not tolerate «any influx of foreign Jews on the scale which evidently appeals» to newspapers like the *Sydney Morning Herald*³⁶. Moreover, as the link between Jews and communists was in its view inextricable, the *Bulletin* urged that «Every immigrant Jew from Europe or Palestine should be made to sign a declaration that he has never been a member of a Communist organisation, open or disguised, and realises that he will be liable to deportation if he joins any such organisation in Australia»³⁷.

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, true to its earlier positions, did not agree. On July 9 the editor wrote that «there cannot but be disappointment with the negative nature of [White's] speech». He had, in the *Herald's* view, «little that was constructive to offer» towards a solution of the refugee problem:

It is a truism, of course, that the Commonwealth has no racial problem and does not desire to import one. On the other hand, it prides itself on being a democracy, with a strong tradition of tolerance, and any suggestion of racial intolerance constitutes a betrayal of our cherished traditions³⁸.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Bulletin*, 13.07.1938, p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid. Catholic spokesmen in Australia held similar views on the relationship between Jews and communism throughout the 1930s, to the point where the Catholic Freeman's Journal, on July 7, 1938, opposed the entry of refugees «thinking it wrong to give opportunities to people 'who, for one reason or another, are not content to remain in their native land.' See E.M. Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia: Reactions to the European Crises, 1935-1939*. Canberra: ANU Press, 1970, p. 151.

³⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 09.07.1938, p. 16.

There was even a response to White's comment that Australia «cannot do more». To the *Herald*, such a claim was not plausible, especially considering the «undeniable» fact that the country had a great need «for more citizens to develop and defend this continent»³⁹. There was little doubt, in the *Herald's* view, that White was wrong and that his opinions, if reflecting the true attitude of the Australian government, left a great deal to be desired.

Readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* generally felt the same way. «Humanitas», in a letter to the editor dated July 13, asked «Can we not open our doors wide to all the Jews who wish to come here?»⁴⁰ «Australian Scot» wrote two days later that «we should welcome persecuted Jews to this country»; while there were difficulties in doing this, they were «not insurmountable»⁴¹. In such letters there were many reasons given in support of allowing Jews in, and the files of the Department of the Interior indicate that letters like these were read by the Head of the Immigration Branch, A.R. Peters, and others. The refugee issue was becoming increasingly complex, and opinions were forming and polarizing around the twin axes of exclusion and admission. After Evian the department was to face pressure coming from both sides, to the point where something had to give and policy had to be seen to be undergoing some form of modification. It was quite prophetic, therefore, that the Melbourne *Argus* should state, immediately after White's speech, that «a review of existing migration arrangements will be undertaken later in the year by the Federal Cabinet»⁴². The paper had no evidence for making such a statement, but it is possible that a reading of White's speech could have been interpreted this way. It is perhaps no coincidence that this report was printed on the same page as that revealing the details of White's address at Evian.

Once all the speeches had been made, the Conference broke into two sub-committees, designated the Technical Sub-committee⁴³ and the «Sub-committee for the Reception of Organisations Concerned with the Relief of Political Refugees coming from Germany (including Austria)». This was established to accommodate the numerous refugee organizations that were registered as participants at the conference but could not take part in the general sessions. According to Norman Bentwich of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, these organizations «had of course not been invited and really had no locus standi at the Conference, [but] nevertheless, their presence and interest were regarded as natural». Bentwich recalled later that there were more than a hundred of these organizations present, most of which were Jewish. The emissaries of these organizations had been sent to Evian, he stated, «to present their need or their panaceas and, if that was denied them, to waylay the delegates» [10]. It did not come to that, for Myron Taylor, the American President of the Conference, invited the major organizations that had previously

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., July 13, 1938, p. 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., July 15, 1938, p. 10.

⁴² *Argus*, July 9, 1938, p. 9.

⁴³ This was comprised of Brazil, Canada, Chile, the United Kingdom, the USA, France, Haiti, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Its brief was to «hear in confidence the statements of laws and practices of the participating governments, statements of the number and types of immigrants each is prepared to receive and consider the question of documentation." For a discussion of its role and performance, see Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*, pp. 89-90.

presented memoranda «to amplify their views, if they so wished⁴⁴». Some thirty-nine organizations stepped forward to take advantage of the offer and put their case.

The sub-committee was comprised of Australia, Belgium, Costa Rica, Cuba, France, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela. Australia's Thomas White was elected to the chair, and the sub-committee, with extreme haste, proceeded to hear the depositions of some twenty-five of the thirty-nine organizations on the single afternoon of July 8. As chair, White decided that each organization should be heard separately⁴⁵, but as time was limited, speed was of the essence. The deputations were therefore processed, in the words of Alfred Stirling (the Australian External Affairs Officer in London), «with unprecedented dispatch».⁴⁶ Prior to the sub-committee's initial sitting, clear guidelines as to procedure were set down for the information of all concerned. It was understood that the representative of each organization would present a memorandum and would be permitted to speak for a limited time. At the end of the overall process, the sub-committee would make a synopsis of all the memoranda and report its findings to the conference.

According to a contemporary witness the hearing was «a humiliating procedure» The representatives of the organizations had to queue up at the door of the meeting room to be called in, one after the other, and to face the eleven members of the Sub-committee to whom they were supposed to tell their tale within ten minutes at the most. There were very distinguished public figures amongst the petitioners—scientists, authors, politicians, etc.—none of them accustomed to any kind of interrogation procedure in front of a Committee, before which they felt rather as though they were on trial, without time to forward their plea, as they had soon to make room for the next invited spokesman. All left the room disheartened and disillusioned [2, p. 255].

Norman Bentwich later recalled that the process of hearing the organizations was speeded up when White and those around him began to grow weary: the period of ten minutes was reduced to five⁴⁷. The depositions, moreover, had to be translated into French if not presented in that language, and consequently there was little enough time for a deposition to be heard before it was time to make way for the next organization. Bentwich—who presented a deposition on behalf of the Council for German Jewry—remembered that the audience chamber was dubbed the «Modern Wailing Wall» by the delegates.

As can be imagined, White's speech at the plenary session and his chairmanship of the sub-committee did little to endear him to many of those present. One of the Jewish representatives who had run the gauntlet of the audience chamber proudly informed Norman Bentwich that he had stood up to White's dismissive treatment of those present: «I told Col. White ... exactly what I thought of him and his statement that Australia had no racial problem and did not want to import any.» Referring to Australia's back-

⁴⁴ Board of Deputies Evian Report.

⁴⁵ Board of Deputies of British Jews Archives, file E3/282/1, Council for German Jewry Report (Report on the Governmental Conference at Evian) prepared by Norman Bentwich, no date.

⁴⁶ NAA, A981, file Refugees 4 Pt 1, «Refugees—General Inter-Governmental Committee (Including Evian Conference) Pt 1», Alfred Stirling to W.R. Hodgson, 17.07.1938.

⁴⁷ Bentwich, My 77 Years, p. 148.

ground as a convict colony of Britain, «I told him that as far as racial origin was concerned, Australians themselves had little cause for pride as to their own ancestors!!!»⁴⁸

While sentiments like these may have assuaged damaged sensitivities, it is highly unlikely that they would have served any good purpose. At the end of the conference White's activities warranted a special favorable mention⁴⁹, and there is little doubt that Australia's praises were sung lustily by many of those participating, most acknowledging that its presence had set an encouraging precedent for future initiatives. The Australian delegation would leave Evian satisfied with its accomplishments.

The conference broke up on July 15, its main outcome being the establishment of a permanent organization in London. When the newly-formed Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees convened there on July 19, Australia's representation was largely the same, but with one important exception: a professional administrator, rather than a politician, was appointed to lead the delegation. J.S. Duncan, the Official Secretary at Australia House, was the new Australian representative, with Alfred Stirling as adviser and A.W. Stuart-Smith as secretary.

In the long run, the existence of the Inter-Governmental Committee did not change the outcome for the Jews of Europe in the slightest. Attitudes such as those expressed by Thomas White at Evian demonstrated to Hitler that the Jews he did not want were also unwanted throughout the rest of the world. This is not an argument which can only be discussed with the advantage of hindsight. It was clearly apparent to perceptive observers at the time. The tragedy is that while all saw the dangers of inaction, none were prepared to put their words of sympathy into practice. Australia, in this regard, was perhaps more honest than most, as White at least gave reasons as to why Australia was doing nothing. The exercise, however, was hardly flattering, and can have done little or mollify the fears of Jews seeking emigration from Germany and Austria. The Evian Conference clearly demonstrated that the nations of the world, including Australia, did not yet fully understand the implications of what was happening in Germany in any terms other than their own.

One of the myths coming from the Evian Conference is that when White made his «no real racial problems» speech he also announced a liberalization of Australian refugee policy. The juxtaposition of the two themes, while ludicrous, is also based on an entirely flawed reading of history. On December 1, 1938, the Australian Minister for the Interior, John McEwen, announced a new policy to admit 15,000 refugees (not specifically Jewish) over the next three years. This policy had nothing to do with Evian, but was, rather, a response to Germany's *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 9-10—three weeks earlier. Because White spoke in Parliament regarding the new policy at this time, however, the impression was created for many that it was somehow linked to Evian. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. At Evian, White went out of his way to demonstrate that Australia was neither prepared to relax the immigration

⁴⁸ Board of Deputies Evian Report.

⁴⁹ NAA, A981, file Refugees 4 Pt 1, «Refugees—General Inter-Governmental Committee (including Evian Conference) Pt 1», Alfred Stirling to W.R. Hodgson, 17.07.1938.

machinery nor to accommodate the needs of the refugees. On December 1, 1938 the government announced enthusiastically that it was going to make a significant contribution to easing the refugee problem⁵⁰. The linkage between the Evian Conference and the announcement on December 1 remained, however, and over time the two issues became merged in the public mind. The logic behind the statement that Australia did not want to «import» a racial problem by allowing a Jewish refugee presence in July 1938 was evidence that perhaps Australia already did have such a problem⁵¹.

Australia's record at Evian stands about on par with those of the other nations assembled. Thomas White informed the world that Australia had neither an interest in, nor a desire to help the resolution of, the refugee problem. On one level, it is not surprising that Evian saw no grand commitments toward refugee acceptance: that had never been part of Roosevelt's proposal when calling the meeting back in March. It will be recalled, for example, that the original invitation indicated how no country would be expected to receive a greater number of immigrants than was already permitted by its existing legislation. This was, in fact, an attractive reason for attendance for most of those attending. It was perhaps an optimistic hope, then, that these countries would have agreed to some great liberalization of their refugee policies. Far from the nations of the world letting down the Jews of Germany, to some extent the opposite was true; the Jews—not only of Germany but also of the Free World—put too much faith in the concept of an international conference the real object of which was only to talk about the refugee crisis. Jewish and other hopes were misplaced, and their expectations too high.

For all that, the gathering at Evian did serve the purpose of concentrating the minds of government leaders, if only for a short time, on the refugee crisis. It *could* have acted as an occasion for caring administrations to voluntarily make some kind of announcement that they would agree to an increase in their refugee quotas. Australia, which had to some extent been drifting in its approach to the problem prior to the Evian Conference, set its sails at that meeting. Few of the nations of the world can claim to have been helpful in receiving Jews or alleviating their plight, and Australia, despite the hopes held by many people of good will, typified the world's approach.

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⁵⁰ See, for example, Paul R. Bartrop's article [6].

⁵¹ Australia's position regarding refugees from Nazi persecution has been dealt with comprehensively in a number of studies. See, for example, those publications [4; 17].

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УЧАСТИЕ АВСТРАЛИИ В РАБОТЕ ЭВИАНСКОЙ КОНФЕРЕНЦИИ: ПРОЯВЛЕНИЕ ПОСЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬНОСТИ ИЛИ ОШИБКА?

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В статье анализируется роль Австралийского Содружества в работе Эвианской конференции в июле 1938 г. Статья показывает, что отношение правительства Австралии к обсуждаемым вопросам с самого начала было непоследовательным и противоречивым: Австралия была готова участвовать в конференции, только в случае присутствия там Великобритании. Согласившись в итоге направить на конференцию своего представителя, австралийские власти выбрали для этой роли такого кандидата, который не был специалистом ни по миграции, ни по внешней политике. Министр торговли и таможенного контроля Томас Уайт (позднее ставший сэром) занял легалистскую и неконструктивную позицию, которая привела в отчаяние членов еврейской делегации.

Уайт был избран главой одного из двух подкомитетов конференции и относился к еврейским делегатам крайне неприязненно. Его выступление на конференции было высоко оценено различными официальными лицами, при этом оно содержало одни из самых бесчеловечных заявлений за всю историю австралийской политики. И это случилось в тот момент, когда Австралия делала первые шаги на мировой арене как суверенное государство.

Ключевые слова: Австралия, Холокост, Содружество, евреи, Министерство иностранных дел Великобритании, США, Эвианская конференция.

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