

**My Place for Teachers  
Decade Overview 1950s**

Decade Summary	1958
<p>The 1950s was the decade that saw the birth of the 'suburban dream'. It was an era dominated by full employment, a good standard of living, family- focused values and the 'suburban dream' of a house of one's own with the latest labour-saving appliances. New suburbs were developed with detached houses on large blocks. The US influence increased with the introduction of 'pop' music and television (1956). Robert Menzies (1894–1978) was returned to power in 1949 and became the longest-serving Australian prime minister.</p> <p>These boom economic conditions allowed for the continued growth of the Australian economy and an ambitious new migration program that included incentives for non-British settlers to migrate to Australia. Post-war refugees from Greece, Italy, Poland, Germany and the Netherlands established significant communities. They assimilated into Australian society, learning the language, establishing new businesses and contributing their own cultural practices to enrich life for many future generations of Australians.</p> <p>Yet simultaneously with this material progress and cultural optimism, there was fear and uncertainty. The first decade of the Cold War experienced the polarisation of Western democratic societies and those of the Eastern communist block. The ensuing Cold War was dominated by the relationship between the USA and the USSR. Tensions arose due ideology, economics, military power and territorial disputes, as well as the division of Germany into East and West zones. In Australia, anti-communist fears led indirectly to the split of the Australian Labor Party into extreme right and left factions, and the longest term in power by a conservative government. During this decade, compulsory military service for 18-year-old males was introduced as a security measure in readiness for another war.</p>	<p><b>January</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The first Opera House lottery is held in NSW to raise money for its construction.</li> </ul> <p><b>February</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals (FCAA) is established and later included Torres Strait Islanders. Among its leaders are Faith Bandler and Chicka Dixon, and the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker).</li> </ul> <p><b>August</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Herb Elliott sets a world record in the mile distance race (3:54.5) at Morton Stadium in Dublin, Ireland.</li> </ul> <p><b>September</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <i>ANZAC Day Act 1958</i> receives Royal Assent, making Anzac Day (25 April) a national public holiday in Australia.</li> </ul> <p><b>October</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sir Douglas Mawson, Antarctic explorer and geologist, dies at the age of 76.</li> </ul> <p><b>November</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The first television episode of <i>Bandstand</i>, hosted by Brian Henderson, goes to air on TCN-9.</li> </ul>

## History and Politics

<b>Immigration</b>	<p>After the Second World War and as a result of the war refugee crisis, the Australian Labor government launched an ambitious new immigration program, which meant that for the first time Australia would accept non-British European immigrants. This new policy received bipartisan support and was continued even after the December 1949 election of Robert Menzies as prime minister.</p> <p>During 1951 and 1952, the Australian government signed agreements to accept Dutch, Italian, Austrian, Belgian, Greek, Spanish and West German immigrants. Some Australians used the offensive term 'wog' to describe non-British immigrants. The term 'wog' is an ethnic slur used to denote immigrants of predominately Middle Eastern and eastern or southern European origin.</p> <p>Through this open-door immigration policy between 1947 and 1961, the Greek community grew from 12,300 to 77,300, making it Australia's fifth-largest migrant group. Other prominent new migrant groups included the Italian community (33,600 to 228,000), the Dutch community (2,200 to 102,100) and the German community (14,600 to 109,300).</p> <p>In 1955, Australia recorded its 1 millionth 'New Australian'. It was 21-year-old newly wed Barbara Porritt from Yorkshire, England.</p>
<b>Discriminatory government policies</b>	<p>In 1951, the federal government convened the Native Welfare Conference, with all states and territories represented except Victoria and Tasmania. At the time, Tasmania and Victoria claimed they had no Aboriginal 'problem' and therefore did not need to be part of the discussions. The conference officially adopted a policy of assimilation of Aboriginal people into non-Indigenous communities. Through a series of government policies and practices, many Indigenous children were taken from their families and communities in an attempt to 'assimilate' them into non-Indigenous society. These children and their families have come to be known as the Stolen Generations.</p>
<b>Indigenous activism</b>	<p>In 1958, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) was set up. This group brought together a number of Aboriginal organisations and welfare groups, and played a large part in bringing about the 1967 referendum.</p> <p>The National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC), which later became the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), agreed that an annual day of remembrance and celebration of Aboriginal people and their cultures be held on the second Sunday in July.</p>
<b>The Korean War</b>	<p>Between 1950 and 1953, Australian forces were involved in the Korean civil war. The war began when communist forces from North Korea invaded South Korea by crossing the 38th parallel, which had been set as the division between the North and the South at the end of the Second World War.</p> <p>The USA supported South Korea, and because of Australia's commitment to the ANZUS Pact, prime minister Robert Menzies committed Australian soldiers to fight alongside the US and South Korean soldiers. North Korea was supported by two communist countries; the Soviet Union and China. Thereafter, it became a protracted war of attrition with neither side able to gain a significant advantage. About 17,000 Australian troops served in Korea with 1,500 casualties, 339 of whom were killed by the time a truce was called in July 1953.</p>
<b>The DLP</b>	<p>In 1951, prime minister Robert Menzies held a referendum to ban the Communist Party of Australia. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) led by Dr</p>

	<p>Herbert Vere 'Doc' Evatt (1894–1965) a strong advocate for the 'rights of the individual' campaigned against it. The referendum was narrowly defeated but the fear of communism did not disappear from federal politics.</p> <p>In 1954, Vladimir Petrov, a Canberra-based Soviet diplomat, defected to Australia. At the next election, Menzies campaigned on a strong anti-communist platform, narrowly winning when the Australian Labor Party was expected to win. Dr Evatt later accused the (largely Catholic) right wing of his own party of a conspiracy against him due to their anti-communist sentiment. Subsequently, the ALP split in 1955, the right wing creating the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which was strongly anti-ALP and directed all its preferences to the conservative Liberal-Country Party coalition. This division helped ensure that Labor remained out of power until 1972.</p>
<p><b>Fear of 'reds'</b></p>	<p>During the 1950s, many Australians stopped supporting a socialist ideology for fear of being 'named' as a communist and losing their job. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was taking advantage of its powers and watching people and politicians, tapping phones and confiscating passports from suspected communists.</p> <p>The attempt by Menzies to ban the Communist Party became a watershed in Australian society. The <i>Communist Party Dissolution Bill 1950</i> (Cth), the subsequent High Court case and referendum campaign after the Bill was thrown out by the High Court polarised the Australian population, particularly blue-collar workers and employers.</p> <p>The Communist Party played a major role in the campaign for workers' rights. In the 1950s, the party had to form an alliance with progressive factions of the Australian Labor Party and the trade unions against the Liberal-Country Party government, the employers and the right wing of the labour movement.</p>

## Society and Culture

### Firsts

In July 1950, the ballet *Corroboree* was performed for the first time by the National Theatre Ballet. The score was written by John Antill, and was inspired by Antill's visits to Aboriginal communities at La Perouse in Sydney. *Corroboree* later became the first full-length ballet representing Indigenous cultural knowledge and movements to be performed to a national audience. One interpretation was influenced by observations of people from Arnhem Land.

In 1950, Neville Shute's novel *A Town like Alice* was published in London and became an instant bestseller.

In November 1955, Ray Lawler's play *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was first performed in Melbourne. Highly successful, it would go on to become the first Australian play to tour overseas.

In December 1955, the character Edna Everage (performed by Barry Humphries) made her first stage appearance at a Christmas revue in Melbourne. Edna welcomed ticket holders to the Melbourne Olympics and appeared on the first television broadcasts in 1956.

In 1956, Australia hosted its first Olympic Games in Melbourne.

In 1957, the Danish architect, Jørn Utzon (1918–2008), won an international competition for the design of the Sydney Opera House.

In 1959, Australia's population reached 10 million.

### Popular Media

In June 1953, Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in Westminster Abbey was reproduced in the magazine *Australian Women's Weekly*, with glossy photographs that produced sales of close to 1 million copies.

In 1954, the first full-length colour feature film, *The Queen in Australia*, was produced by the federal Department of the Interior. It covered the Queen's inaugural tour of Australia. An estimated 70 per cent of Australia's population turned out to see the Queen on this tour.

In 1954, a documentary about life on the Birdsville Track, *The Back of Beyond* by John Heyer, won Australia's first ever Grand Prix Award at the Venice Film Festival.

In 1955, the last film by Charles Chauvel, *Jedda*, was released. It starred two Aboriginal actor, Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth, and was the first Australian colour film.

In March 1958, the first Australian Top 40 chart of popular music was released by Sydney radio station 2UE. Johnny O'Keefe and the DeeJays were the most popular group with their hit song, *Wild One*. In 1956 Bill Haley's *Rock around the Clock* was released and Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Hotel*.

In 1959, the series *Six o'clock Rock*, hosted by rock singer Johnny O'Keefe, was televised on Channel 2 in competition with *Bandstand* on Channel 9.

### Television

In 1954, the Menzies government formally announced the introduction of the new two-tiered television system. A government-funded service would be run by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), and two commercial services would broadcast from Sydney and Melbourne.

In September 1956, the first Australian TV broadcast took place on Sydney's Channel 9, featuring Bruce Gyngell. On 19 November 1956, the ABC began transmission in Melbourne, just in time to broadcast the Olympic Games. Black-and-white TV created such public interest that people gathered in front of shop windows to watch. Over the decades TV's popularity and accessibility grew and was seen as the dominant factor in the decline of cinema attendances. In 1955, there were 1,644 cinemas in Australia, but this figure had declined to 974 by 1970.

In January 1953, the Menzies government amended the *Broadcasting Act 1948* (Cth) granting commercial licenses. This allowed for a dual system of TV ownership; commercial and non-commercial.

Most TV programs in this early period were based on favoured radio formats with musical variety and quiz formats were the most popular. Many programs were imported from the USA and UK, increasing the influence of US culture in Australia. Children's shows were derived from popular literature, particularly heroes and legends. The British-made *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, starring Richard Greene, was telecast for 143 episodes.

## Science and Technology

### CSIRO achievements

In 1950, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) released the myxomatosis virus into the Murray Valley as part of its ongoing attempt to eliminate rabbits, which had become a pest and a threat to native fauna. The myxomatosis virus was South American in origin and effectively spread with devastating consequences on rabbit populations, killing more than 90 per cent of those it encountered.

In 1953, CSIRO was also responsible for revolutionising the manufacture of woollen products by developing a process that makes woollen fabrics shrink resistant. Also in 1953, the radiophysics division of CSIRO developed the Mills Cross radio telescope, which was capable of taking radio astronomical measurements to within a range of 1 metre.

In April 1955, the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories began mass production of the poliomyelitis vaccine, and in June 1956 all state and territory governments began a free mass vaccination program. Over the next year, only 125 new cases of polio were reported compared to 4,735 over the three previous years.

### Technological accomplishments

In 1950, the railway systems in Tasmania and Queensland replaced steam engines with diesel locomotives. This conversion was emulated by other states and territories soon after.

In 1951, CSIRO held its first computer conference and buzzed the world's first digital music to an international audience.

In 1951, the Shell Company began to establish a new £5 million oil refinery in Geelong, which the federal government promised would meet one-quarter of Australia's petrol needs.

In September 1951, the first cargo of iron ore was shipped from Yampi Sound in the north-west of Western Australia to Port Kembla in New South Wales.

In 1952 Lang Hancock, mining entrepreneur, discovered the world's largest iron ore deposit in the Pilbara region of northern Western Australia.

In January 1958, two Qantas planes took off from Melbourne airport to begin the first round-the-world service operating out of Australia. Travelling in opposite directions (one west, the other east), they both arrived in London and returned to Australia within six days.

In July 1959, the first jet aeroplane, a Boeing 707, was acquired by Qantas and arrived in Sydney.

### Powering Australia

In May 1953, the 100,000th Holden came off the production line at the Fishermens Bend plant in Melbourne.

By the end of June 1955, more than 2 million motor vehicles were registered in Australia in a population not yet 10 million. This meant that nearly half the families in Australia now owned a car.

In April 1955, prime minister Robert Menzies opened the first stage of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme in the upper Snowy River, NSW. In June 1957, deputy prime minister Arthur Fadden closed the outlet gates at Adaminiby Dam and the reservoir began to fill, completing the second stage of the Scheme. On 4 May 1959, the first major power station of the Scheme, 'Tumut 1', became operational.

**Nuclear power**

In 1952, Britain exploded an atom bomb in the uninhabited Monte Bello Islands off the north-west coast of Australia. Not long after, the Australian Atomic Energy Commission (AAEC) was established with the power to research and undertake uranium exploration and operate generating plants.

In June 1953, the British and Australian governments jointly announced that the British government was developing atomic weapons and would be testing them in Australia. The tests that lasted ten years began in October at the test site at Woomera in South Australia.

In September 1954, Menzies opened the first uranium treatment plant, and regular uranium shipments to Britain and the USA began. A year later, the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor and research centre was constructed near Sydney. It became operational in April 1958.

In September 1956, the first testing of nuclear weapons began at Maralinga, part of the Woomera Prohibited Area in South Australia. The traditional owners of the land, the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara peoples, were not consulted about the testing and most were forcibly removed to a newly established mission, which became known as Yalata.