Activity 14.2

- For some years the federal parliament held its meetings in Melbourne. How do you think Members of Parliament from other States would have travelled there?
- How does your local Member of the House of Representatives travel to Canberra today? Approximately how long do you think it takes him or her?

Common problems: immigration

The advantages of federation also became evident as the colonies met problems which could be solved only through joint action. Chinese immigration is a good example. During the gold rushes Victoria had legislated to prevent the entry of Chinese, but they had continued to flow in through New South Wales and South Australia, until those two colonies passed legislation similar to that of Victoria.

Chinese immigration caused trouble on a number of later occasions, particularly in Queensland in the 1870s. At one stage, Chinese formed one-eleventh of the population of that colony, and had practically taken over the Palmer goldfield. In 1881 representatives of all the eastern colonies met in Sydney to consider the formation of a joint immigration policy. By that time, some Australian leaders were coming...
to believe that a council or parliament was needed to make laws for the whole of Australia with regard to immigration.

Another immigration problem concerned the employment of Pacific Islanders — known as Kanakas — in the Queensland sugar industry. They were recruited by ship-owners, who claimed that the islanders entered into contracts to work for a certain number of years in Queensland, on condition that they were then returned to their native islands. Actually, however, the recruiting was often no better than kidnapping, the islanders being taken on board by trickery or force.

By the 1880s the Queensland government wished to prohibit the use of Kanaka labour, but it was feared that such a step would ruin the sugar-growers. White labour would be more expensive and, if it were used, the industry would need some form of government protection, not just in Queensland but in the other colonies, so that Australian sugar-growers would have the whole Australian market reserved for them. This was just the sort of problem which a federal government could best handle.

Activity 14.3
• Imagine that in Australia at present each State had the power to decide whom it would admit as immigrants. Would this be a desirable situation? Would it be effective?

Foreign policy and defence

Matters of foreign policy and defence also showed the need for a central government. A number of countries, most of which Britain had fought wars against in the past, had set up colonies close to Australia; while far to the north another former enemy, Russia, was developing a strong naval base at Vladivostok. Some Australians felt that if there were one government to speak for the whole of Australia, there would be a better chance of making Britain realise the danger of this situation.

German annexation of part of New Guinea provided an illustration of this point. In 1883 the Governor of Queensland, hearing rumours of Germany’s intentions, announced the annexation in the Queen’s name of the whole eastern half of the island, but the British government repudiated this action. In the following year, Britain at last agreed to claim the south-eastern part, known as Papua, but Germany gained possession of the north-east and the nearby islands. Many Australians believed that, if there had been one government to speak for the whole of Australia, the mother country might have listened to it and forestalled Germany. As Sir Henry Parkes later declared, ‘If Australia could have spoken with one voice in 1883, New Guinea would have belonged to Australia’.

As Australian leaders became more aware of foreign affairs and their importance to Australia, they naturally became worried about the colonies’ defence preparations. They asked the British Government to send an officer to examine the armed forces of the colonies and to