

The Return of the Native

Will Australia be diminished as our citizens depart? Or grow with the ideas they bring back?

Story by Deirdre Macken

Scientist Bryan Gaensler has no regrets about the nine years he spent living in the United States. "It was the smartest thing I ever did," he says. And yet he has returned to Australia with an identity that will always be torn.

"I am more patriotic about Australia because of my experience, but I have a real affection towards the US, the same sort of affection you might feel for a cousin or an uncle. I feel at home in both places, so I suppose I belong to a bigger family now."

National identity has always been challenged by migration. For centuries, the Irish were more tied by heritage than geography. For decades, New Zealanders have treated Bondi as second home, and for millions of Filipinos, Cubans and Chinese, home is the post box where cheques are remitted.

Australians have joined the great diasporas of the world. The flow of people in and out of the country is reshaping how Australians think of themselves and how they think of their country.

At anyone time there are almost 1 million Australians living overseas and 600,000 foreigners living in Australia. The annual flow of people is three times greater than the permanent movement of migrants.

Governments struggle with immigration tensions, set up value tests for citizenship and redefine the meaning of multiculturalism, but there is little inquiry into how the temporary movements of people are reshaping identity.

Concentrating the national debate on immigration and multiculturalism ignores the much larger and more pervasive threat to identity - the idea that nationality is becoming detached from geography.

Demographer Graeme Hugo says the influence of migrants in Australia might preoccupy national debate but points out that "a similar impact is being made by people who have lived overseas and returned".

"There's a tendency to look at them in economic terms - the skills they return with, the networks and work experiences - but they come back with different social attitudes, too," he says.

The impacts of the foreign sabbatical on the national psyche are as varied as the life stories of the wanderers. Bryan Gaensler may feel he belongs to a bigger family, while writer Lisa Clifford says: "There comes a point when it's incredibly hard to think of yourself as anything but an expat.

"Home doesn't feel like home anymore."

If geography is divorced from identity, then questions can be asked about whether a person is still an Australian if she/he lives overseas; or has lived overseas for years, or if she/he intends to stay overseas forever. Identity becomes more a question of time than one of place and the answer is largely left to the person to decide.

But whether they bring new families back to Australia as Gaensler did, or start new families in Italy, as Clifford did, the experiences of footloose citizens will have increasing influence on national identity for three major reasons.

Globalisation will continue to expand the movement of people across the world. Already there are 60 million Chinese, 20 million Indians, 5.5 million Britons and 2.7 million Canadians living overseas. While the growth in Australian expats has been rapid for the past 15 years, similar countries have much higher remote populations. One in 20 Australians lives abroad whereas one in 10 Britons and Canadians live overseas and one in six New Zealanders are offshore.

The flow in and out of Australia is an elite phenomenon. Unlike some Asian countries, where emigration is often a desperate move by the working class, Australia is receiving and farewelling top talent.

Not only are most of the Australians abroad university educated and part of the professional or managerial ranks, but foreigners working in Australia are twice as likely to be university educated and 60 per cent are professionals or managers.

These lawyers, accountants, managers, academics and medical staff who arrive back from foreign sojourns will form the next generation of leaders. As Hugo says, "more and more decision makers in Australia will have to be people who have lived overseas for extended periods of time. So they will influence our society

even more in the future."

The third major reason for taking the expatriate phenomena seriously is the global aspiration of younger generations. In the 15 years since temporary migration began to escalate, the vast majority of itinerants has been aged under 40 years. The trend among educated Gen X has been to go overseas a few years after qualifying, work for two to five years and return home to start a family. Generation Y will be even more nomadic.

According to a survey done by the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, 62 per cent of graduates say they want to work overseas in their early careers. Another poll done by the Institute of Chartered Accountants found that almost half of accountants aged 21 to 30 intended to go overseas to work within the next two years.

Already, 15 per cent of qualified accountants are working overseas (double what it was 25 years ago and according to the West Australian general manager of the institute, Con Abbott, it's becoming a rite of passage for young accountants.

"Generation Y sees employment as a global market whereas the baby boomers saw it as a national market," he says. The major attraction of accounting to the new generation is that it's a passport an international career."

The global convergence of laws and regulations has created a familiar landscape for practising in finance industries. Similar convergences have made it possible to practise law, medicine information technology and teaching anywhere in the world.

A measure of this mobility was found in a study done by Hugo. In the decade to 2004, Australia attracted 26,000 overseas doctors either temporarily or permanent and lost 18,000 locally trained doctors. Among the academic community, Australia received 15,000 academics in the same period and lost 9000, either temporarily or forever. In science, the flow included 24,000 arriving scientists and 17,000 departing scientists.

The cumulative effect of the overseas experience will be substantial, For example, an STA Travel survey this month found that 40 per cent of Generation Y take a gap year to travel. Combined with the 5 per cent of the population who are working overseas long-term, the number of Australians who have had extensive experience overseas will soon be in the majority.

But calibrating this experience into identity is less easy. There are some like American political scientist Samuel Huntington who believe that "the transnational elite are dead souls, with little feelings of commitment to their native land."

But the polls of Australians abroad don't support this idea. According to a major survey supported by the Southern Cross Group, Australians who are overseas are often more patriotic than those still at home or than they themselves were before they left.

"It's amazing how Australian they are, being away amplifies their identity with Australia and this is made much easier by their ability to stay in touch with local media online and with family and friends through technology. They're very patriotic," says Hugo.

Clifford married an Italian, has two Italian sons and as her book, *The Promise*, chronicles, she is reconciled to living in Italy. Yet, she says, "my Australian identity is very much intact. Even though I call myself an expat. I still identify with that straightforwardness of Australians, that sense of naturalness that's very practical.'

Gaensler also married overseas but has returned to live in Sydney with his American wife and son to work as a Federation Fellow at the University of Sydney. While he says he feels more patriotic, this sentiment is tempered by a wider perspective.

"I look at Australia with a more critical eye and that doesn't mean a negative one," he says. "I can look at it in a new way, with an understanding of what Australian culture is like, how it is being influenced and how it compares with others. It's a less complacent view of your own country."

There are other common characteristics among those returning. Mostly they return wealthier than their colleagues who stayed behind because they've had access to bigger jobs in bigger markets that offer internationally scaled wages. This wealth is reflected in the increasingly high rate of expatriate buying at the top end of the property market.

They have work experiences that aren't available to them in the local market and often move into more important jobs on their return. This is particularly so in science and academic circles.

But they don't always come back to an appreciative reception.

"There is something of the tall poppy syndrome that suggests the returning expat should just get over it and get down to business," says Hugo. "Lots of expats talk of experiencing some antipathy on their return. This is true not just of colleagues but of employers who take a negative view, saying things like 'well, you've been out of the system for a while', as if it's a handicap to have been away."

Gaensler has experienced two sorts of reactions. "There's the cultural cringe, where people say you must be so disappointed to be back here, and then there's the tall poppy response, where they say 'well, Mr Harvard, we don't do things like that here'."

The field of social remittances is attracting more research around the world simply because so many countries are dealing with - and benefiting from - the geographic flows of their people.

Citizens living overseas don't just bring back - or send back - money and experiences. They carry different attitudes, habits, aspirations and even political beliefs between continents.

For instance, research has shown that Indian bureaucracy has been reshaped partly because of ideas brought back by Indians and ideas generated by Indians living in the US. Similarly, there's a view that Greece has been made more entrepreneurial by the impact of returning Greek diaspora.

Even though stay-at-home Australians might be suspicious of their high-flying neighbours, more institutions are catering for the trade in talent. Accountancy firms, lawyers, nursing agencies, and IT groups now make allowances for staff to take extended overseas leave and they're beginning to recruit former employees from overseas posts. The accountancy industry bases its recruitment of students around the slogan of the global career.

More universities are catering to youth's quest to work overseas by introducing international studies to their curriculums. This year the University of Sydney also introduced a bachelor in global studies to better equip students for overseas lives.

A few truly global professions, especially science, expect their top talent to spend time working overseas and reward them with higher posts than their colleagues who stayed behind.

Surprisingly though, at the highest level of business, the expat has barely made an impact. Although many of the top 100 companies recruit foreigners as CEOs, very few find CEOs among the Australians living overseas.

If we know little about the impact that AWOL Australians have on society and culture, we know even less about the influences being brought to bear by the 600,000 foreigners living among us.

Yet they represent 4 per cent of the total workforce; they are highly educated, often having been educated here; they are mostly young - average age 29 years - and half of them have been here for more than one year. Many will finish their studies here with a residency ticket and many others will marry here.

Some of their impact is prosaic. They help fill skills shortages, provide temporary labour, help university budgets and feed the property market. But the habits they bring, their political beliefs, attitudes and alliances are unfathomed.

The biggest fear of many Australians is that the global movement of people will lead to a more homogenised national identity and, ultimately, a lessening of the Australian character. If Australians want migrants to forget about their old cultures when they arrive, then they might also want Australians to forget their overseas experience when they return.

Gaensler admits that since his return six months ago, he has joined a subculture of expats.

"I find myself gravitating to those who've lived overseas, because we have so many things in common, whether they are Australians who've lived overseas or Americans who are living in Australia at the moment," he says.

Over in Italy, Clifford also finds herself in the centre of expat communities.

"I call myself an expat and I do love that life - the constant stimulation, the change all the time. After you've been an expat for a while, you're always an expat."

Whether Australia will be made smaller by its absent citizens or whether it becomes bigger in imagination because of its extended networks is yet to be settled. But the ties to flag and country are being reshaped.

"Some people have argued that the nation-state is dead, but the reality is that people have different degrees of commitment to more than one nation-state," says Hugo.

"What we're going to have to do is accept that we'll have more people who belong to more than one country."

Having a country that can come to terms with that is very important and every country struggles with that."

Living in a foreign clime makes expats of some Australians and it turns others into immigrants. Both experiences are a fundamental part of Australia's heritage, but they'll also play a big part in its future.