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We expats - our needs, our connection with home

By David Davis

November 4, 2003

Sydney Morning Herald Online Webdiary

David Davis began reading and contributing to Webdiary in its first week, back in July 2000. He lives and works in Europe.

A doctor friend once explained to me that Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) mainly occurs in immigrant nations like Australia, the US, Canada and New Zealand. Apparently this is borne out in the statistics. His theory was that people with ADD were originally more likely to migrate, and that's why Australia is full of restless people.

This guy is one of my best friends, and ever since I can remember we've had a conversation pattern where he proposes something ridiculous and then I try to argue why there is no reason why his absurd proposition could be true. Often though, I am left with a nagging doubt. For the purposes of this, I'll call my friend John.

Our ancestors may have been tilling fields in Europe 150 years ago. John asked me the question, "So who do you think is the most likely one to down tools and head for the docks to board a boat bound for Australia"? His theory is that it is the one with ADD and that is why it is so prominent in the genetic pool of Australia. I put it to him that much of the immigration wasn't based on someone suddenly downing tools in the middle of a field and immediately heading for the docks. John wasn't interested because his principle still holds true no matter which way you express it.

Australians love to travel and nearly a million Australians now choose to live overseas. The love of travel is more understandable than the size of the diaspora. Most Australians believe that they live in "god's own", so it is interesting that such a significant proportion of the country's citizens are living far from its shores. I suspect few people would blame it on a propensity toward ADD.

If that was the case, then I should just pop a Ritalin, call Qantas and ask for a one way ticket back home. If we were all on Ritalin then none of us would have to leave.

Of course it is more complex than that. There's nearly a million of us (I figure if I keep repeating the number, the magnitude of this will get through) and we are spread all over. Around half a million are here in Europe with more than half of those being here in Continental Europe, far away (mentally at least) from the UK. I have some idea of why I am here, but what about the others?

Also there is the curious aspect of the Australians back at home and their feelings toward expats. I am not talking "expats" as being people who go to London for a year and then come here to Continental Europe for six weeks at the end of it. Everyone likes them because they are on their rite of passage tour and before you know it, they will be back home, marrying and settling down. Funnily enough, they are small in number compared to the overall one million living abroad.

The feelings toward the larger group of expats (people like me) varies between disinterest and open hostility. My experience is that the feelings of Australians toward their own diaspora are rarely positive. Why is this so?

We are seen as smart arses, people who have somehow betrayed our homeland. This of course is nonsense. People like Germaine Greer, Rolf Harris, Clive James and Robert Hughes are seen as talented but tiresome. What about Barry Mackenzie? The barbs from afar never go down well at home. Rolf doesn't fit in to that group, but what the hell, since everyone else is busily stereotyping so will I. Then we could go into Kylie and talk about Russell Crowe's manners.

This is all a distraction. If Robert Hughes wants to take out American citizenship then good luck to him. I don't care.

My point is that the high profile "names" of the diaspora are not representative. If Germaine Greer thinks Australia is full of misogynists, then don't blame me if it doesn't sit well with you. If Clive James thinks Australia in 2003 is kind of how it was in 1973 then obviously he has been away too long as well. None of the sins of these people should be visited upon the members of the diaspora at large.

Maybe we are pains in the arse, but we are worth considering at least for this aspect. You paid to educate us and while we're gone we are enriching other countries. If we keep our money overseas and are paid here we don't pay any Australian taxes. We are exported for our most valuable taxable years.

All the more for you to pay.

Technology allows us to still feel at home. We don't have to live in a physical ghetto because we can create it electronically. I've contributed to Webdiary for years now. I read the SMH every day. I listen to ABC Radio's AM in the mornings on broadband and to Philip Adams when I get the chance. I'm in daily contact with friends and family back home despite living away.

The technology has helped a lot. I know the difference because I have lived overseas pre and post internet. I once lived in the Midwest of America and felt very isolated. It was like Australia did not exist. There was no email, there was no news of Australia and contact was expensive and difficult.

Fast forward ten years and I can take a picture of my lunch and it will be in Sydney instantaneously for a friend to view. All this while I listen to the ABC and read the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Does this make me a tragic person unable to adapt to my new country? No. It means I understand the meaning of multiculturalism now more than I did growing up. I can be a fully functioning member of the community here and feel totally engaged with Australia at the same time. Thank you internet and thank you Al Gore for inventing it:-)

Remember the "information superhighway" and the "new economy"? Don't laugh too hard, because despite the dot com bust of a few years ago, the internet will continue to revolutionise business and society. I'm not sure if I would be as comfortable living in the middle of Europe if I didn't have the internet.

We are totally "networked". On Sunday I exited the Sigmund Freud museum in Vienna and decided to SMS a mate in Sydney with some kind of inane comment about Freud. A few minutes later he called excited and talked rugby. He was at the Oaks in Neutral Bay and was asking me when I would be back. I had the feeling it was a very cheery afternoon in Sydney as I wandered the rain soaked streets of autumnal Vienna. He said I brought a smile to his face and I said the same of him. We're going through a revolution but don't know it.

I've been indulgent here, but the level of comfort many of us have with our situation is discomfoting. The 21st century expat paradox.

The unanswered question is: "When will you be back?" This part is unclear for many of the million or so of us.

Back to John, my doctor friend. Later this week he flies interstate for an interview then to an overseas location for further interviews if he is successful. I know he will be successful and see him leaving Australia for a longish period. There's more to this than ADD and a lack of Ritalin.

Up until now he has been a GP and has long lectured me on the coming shortage in the cities. Forget just the regional areas, he says. He has also long predicted that bulk billing will die. It will be about supply and demand. Doctors will charge more than the scheduled fee and people will be prepared to pay because of the shortage.

John's old enough to have escaped the worst of HECS. This means he got it free and Australia paid for his six plus years at university and medical school.

The policy issues are myriad, and if John Howard would allow us to examine public policy rather than only security perhaps the gaping holes in our system could be identified and addressed. It's not just about health. It is also about education and all the other higher order things we associate with a rich country like Australia.

Policies change lives. That is why politics and government can never be boring. It's not only that it changes other people's lives. It touches everyone. I'm very much engaged in Australia and would find it insulting and stupid for it to be suggested that I have turned my back.

Many expats are [lobbying](#) on behalf of the rest of the diaspora. There are many issues to consider, like our inability to vote either in the country we live in or back in Australia where we will most likely return. There are also questions of social security, superannuation and taxation. Again, these topics may seem dry, but they can often drive the decisions people make in their lives.

I've been mainly defeated on the diaspora. I considered we had no rights, no one cared and no progress could be made. I was even resigned to the idea that most would not even accept that one million Australians living overseas would be a topic worth looking into.

Margo, you once made the [point](#) that the Senate cares for minority viewpoints and that we should be careful about it because one day each of us may find ourselves in one form of minority or another. I'm in several the older I get. I am very happy with the way the Senate operates. I may not like individual instances where legislation is blocked or subject to amendment but overall I think it serves its purpose exceptionally well.

It is not an anachronistic inconvenience. It lies at the heart of Australian parliamentary democracy, a unique hybrid model that has produced one of the oldest and most stable democracies on earth. There is no "gridlock". There are certain bills where the government struggles, and this is precisely how the system was designed.

John Howard exposes himself when he is seen to be meddling with the Senate. This is when we see a mask slowly being removed. The naked ambition and power grabbing becomes breath-taking. He said he was a conservative, but as he seeks to undermine the power of the Senate he reveals his true nature as a radical. The banality of evil? It's bared teeth and wild eyes. Of course that is taking it too far but let's not forget what he is talking about. During the Republic debate he said our system had served us well. I assumed he meant the entirety of our Constitution, not just the part about "the realm" and all things British.

I've never seen the Senate as being a problem. I know it is part of the system and think horse-trading and compromise is how it was designed. It is in the DNA

of the constitution, in the same way that we as humans are designed to laugh and cry. I see some of the compromises and delays as being damaging but that is just MY view. A true democrat accepts that their view is NOT the only view. I like democracy and checks and balances. Aren't these the things we were taught that make us proud of our system?

Guess what? The system works. One of my pet issues is the diaspora - cause, consequences and reactions. If we had a unicameral legislature as John Howard seems to want, I wouldn't have a hope in hell. I can't vote so why should anyone care?

It turns out that the Australian Senate has a powerful Committee system, kind of like the US Senate. It also turns out that Labor Senator Nick Bolkus has launched an inquiry into the diaspora. Don't you think it is great that Nick Bolkus of the Labor left restores the faith of an angry Liberal?

I couldn't believe my eyes when I read this. I wrote to Nick Bolkus to thank him for doing this and said I would like to contribute. He wrote back and said he hopes that they hear from me as the inquiry progresses. He wrote back on a Saturday. It was not a form letter, it was a personal email. I feel represented. A Labor senator has seen the need. I can't vote but I have a voice in the senate.

Wow. Just when you start to lose hope something like this happens. Democracy is alive and well in Australia. Write to someone like Nick Bolkus and you will be heard. Don't let the bastards get you down because our constitution is bigger than them all. Nick Bolkus does his job. There is no special political gain in any of this. He is doing his job to make Australia a better place. The system works.

I'd be careful about the ASIO law as well. I have zero interest in protecting terrorists but let's keep our heads. The Senate is not changing, and nor is the true nature of our society.

We don't win the war on terror by degrading ourselves. Let's also not forget hospitals and schools because in between the terror attacks - life goes on.

[Inquiry](#) into Australian Expatriates

On 16 October 2003, the Senate referred an inquiry into Australians living overseas to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, for inquiry and report by 1 September 2004. The Committee is to inquire into Australians living overseas: the factors driving them there, their needs and concerns, as well as the economic and social implications for Australia. The full terms of reference are:

Terms of Reference

- (a) the extent of the Australian diaspora;**
- (b) the variety of factors driving more Australians to live overseas;**
- (c) the costs, benefits and opportunities presented by the phenomenon;**
- (d) the needs and concerns of overseas Australians;**
- (e) the measures taken by other comparable countries to respond to the needs of their expatriates; and**
- (f) ways in which Australia could better use its expatriates to promote our economic, social and cultural interests.**

The closing date for the lodgement of submissions is Friday 27 February 2004.

Submissions become Committee documents and are only made public after a decision by the Committee. Unauthorised release of submissions is not covered by parliamentary privilege. Further assistance can be obtained by phoning the secretariat on (02) 6277 3560.

For further information

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