
THE METRIC IMMIGRATION EXPERT

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‘So why should we grant you an extension to your work visa when there is perfectly capable Canadians that would love to have a job like yours. In fact, they might even be better at the job than you!’ said the immigration bureaucrat with belittling authority.

Well I thought to myself, this is an interesting turn of events and something I hadn’t prepared myself for.

‘In addition, you have now been in Canada for three years on a permit than is designed for a maximum stay of one year. Are you staying in Canada or going. Make up your mind.’ barked the official with a steely glare and with a power that I had no choice but placate.

The last foreign worker immigration reviews had been a breeze but this lady had obviously been jaded by something to do with Australians. Perhaps one of her old boyfriends traded her in for a fair maiden from Australia was my initial reaction. Whatever the case, I thought I had better think fast or I will be on the next flight out of here, and besides, I wasn’t ready to leave just yet.

Of course it is in my blood as a seasoned Australian to go the larrikin spirit and reply with some smart arse remark like, ‘because I am handsome’, or ‘half the bars in town would go broke if it wasn’t for me’. But soon after arriving in Canada I had quickly learnt that the conservative Canadians don’t often get it with cheeky remarks or speaking your mind, especially the police (as I learnt the hard way). My immediate future was riding on my response and I was thinking as fast as I could, but kept coming up blank, or posturing some feeble drivel. What will I do? I am on my own and I needed to step up to the plate. This official wasn’t going to go down lightly and I needed a home run to get me on the scoreboard.

Then it dawned upon me. I had the perfect reason for a work permit extension, regardless of how valid it may be. We don’t mind inventive dialogue in Australia, especially when points for effort might get you through, even in the obvious absence of skill or the truth.

So out it blurted ‘the reason you should so kindly grant me an extension to my work visa, madam, is because I am a metric expert’.

‘You are a what?’ replied the clerk with a twisted scowl of confusion.

‘I am a metric expert. You see, the construction industry in Canada has been trying to go metric for many years now and they keep failing. In Australia we have been using metric for many years so I have been teaching all the staff in our office how to prepare and submit construction drawings and documents in metric. And of course I have been having great success in my training to the extent that the city now offers our firm a 10% discount when we submit drawings for a building permit’ I chortled with a glint in my eye and a new found bout of proud enthusiasm.

Well the startled look on the officials face was worth my story alone, even if I didn’t get an extension on my permit. Of course I have been known to extend the truth of a few stories, as is the way of my people, especially when travelling abroad where there is no one to disprove your yarn. Some people who know me have even been heard to proclaim ‘there is an ounce of truth in everything he says’. By the look on the officials face, I was clearly holding the better hand and I am not sure if the following result was out of sheer confusion or shock or even embarrassment. Within ten minutes I had a new document in my proud Australian passport and I was set for another year.

Admittedly, what I was still doing in Canada was still a little bit confusing to me as well. The architecture industry was in a bit of a slump at home and I had that typical nomadic Australian notion itching away at my feet. Having little money saved, I had realised that if I wanted to travel I needed to work and travel at the same time. Having met some Canadians during the fun filled days of Expo 88 in Brisbane (better known as Bris Vegas) and having some family friends in Vancouver, I thought I would I would apply for a permit in Canada. Actually, it was also the only country I had a remote chance of getting a permit from, mainly because I am one of those few Australians with limited foreign heritage that may have got me a passport in some country that wasn’t part of the Commonwealth. So off I set off in 1992 with a one-year work permit and the intention of working for six months, travelling for six months and then heading home. The permit I received was designed for people who wanted to snow ski all day and work in a bar at night, or the ‘license to drink permit’ as I call it. However, being at the older end of the permit’s age scale, my years of permanent hangovers was long gone (Beroca’s just don’t work well enough anymore) and I had no intention of doing bar work. I planned to work professionally, and hopefully learn some new skills that may be very marketable when I returned home, especially with Australia’s fixation with everything North American

Canada and Australia are very similar in politics, economy, religion and other traits of life so I thought the transition would be easy. But it was a collection of little things that started to surface that really cemented in my mind that I had arrived in Canada and wasn’t very prepared at all. Of course there was the climate shock.

When it rains on the Gold Coast, it is over with in an hour and the day just gets more humid. Where in Vancouver, when it rains, it often does so for three months without stopping and if you are lucky, it might drop a few degrees in temperature and the rain turns to snow. I had owned one umbrella in my entire life in Australia and if you got wet, it was warm enough that you dried off again quickly. Whereas in Canada if you get wet, it gets in your bones and you are likely to die, or spend the entire season with the flu. Living in Vancouver, I now own about ten umbrellas.

But it was more serious things that made me realise I was not prepared nor had even done a reasonable amount of research as to what I was getting myself in for. I had arrived in Canada intending the work in architecture and I had no clue what firm did what in the city. I had worked entirely in commercial practices and in looking in the yellow pages, I didn't know if I was cold calling a firm that did the work I was qualified for. (Remember, this is long before the luxury of the Internet). But Australians are known as battlers, and adversity is what makes us excel. Over the next several weeks, I literally wore out an entire pair of shoes pounding the proverbial pavement doing my research, and this was all before even applying for an actual job. Oh and did I ever get lost, but that is part of the magic of living and discovering a new city, even to the extent that I was telling my hosts more about the city they had lived in than what they knew. Also, what was inspirational is that every adversity results in an experience if you put the right frame of mood to it. I was having a ball but I was also very quickly running out of money. I didn't know anyone well enough to borrow money, and my pride certainly would not let me accept defeat in asking my parents for a loan. I was determined to make it on my own. My parents had always said that if you are not mature enough to save to go overseas then you are not mature enough to survive overseas. So survive I would.

One inspirational thing is the good old Australian accent is associated with fun times, is respected around the world, and has no history of bad experiences. So whilst a lot of the firms didn't have positions vacant, they all warm heartedly and good-naturedly opened the door and welcomed me in for a chat. Some I think wanted to meet an Australian (and ask about Crocodile Dundee), and others possibly thought that I may be able to offer some skill that was marketable or unique. But while I was meeting these people and doing my research, I also needed to stop the ebb of funds and I started looking for part time work. The first job I was offered was from a fellow who overheard me talking to the deli that I had once dreamed of owning. The job was working in a fish shop but the pay they offered was \$5.50 an hour. I am embarrassed to think back on it, but my reaction was to say \$5.50 an hour, I was earning that when I was 10 years old, painting fences. Little did I know that the basic wage is quite low in north America and the trick is to get a job that pays tips (something I would later

marvel at how my room mate worked in a bar and owned a house, and I was working professionally and couldn't even afford a car. The secret, tips are usually tax-free). So whilst I was running out of money, my pride wouldn't allow me to work for such low wages.

However, soon I secured my first job for a firm that did commercial work but my troubles had only just begun. My boss gave me a project that would later lead to my becoming the metric expert. It was a nice project, to design an office, but the problem was I was expected to draw it up in imperial. The last time I talked feet and inches was when I was in grade 4. Now I had to design a building and I couldn't even figure out what scale I was meant to use. I was fully versed in Australia to the extent that if I was drawing a kitchen I could draw lines at 600mm apart and at scale 1:20 without even using a scale ruler. And here I was turning the ruler over and over going what the heck does 1/8 of an inch to a foot mean, let alone what is the size of a typical door. Of course stubborn pride came into it again. I couldn't ask the friendly staff what scale I should draw in, they would be running off to the boss saying how the new bloke is so good that he doesn't know what to draw. I wanted to reserve my questions for ones that would make me look intelligent, questions like, the Fire Code in Australia says I must have a an egress route of three metres, is it the same in Canada.

So there I was doing drawings at scales that often meant ripping up the sheet of paper and starting again. I inevitably got to the end of the page and hadn't got half the block of land on the sheet. Oh well, I guess I don't draw up site plans in that scale I concluded, and off I would start again, using the other side of the ruler and hoping everything fitted on to the page this time. My boss was understanding, but when asked how I was doing at the end of the week, he said, well, we didn't realise your learning curve to the Canadian systems would be so steep, so we think it is best we let you go. That fish and chip shop job was starting to look good again.

But set backs are opportunities to learn and several years later I had that same boss trying to lure me back with all sorts of incentives once I had established a reputation. The beauty of coming from another country is people remember you. So once I learnt that imperial system, a new trait kicked in. I always thought Australians had a reputation as shovel leaning bludgers, but working overseas we are not only known to be fun to work with, but we are also known as having an exceptional work ethic and typically saying "the show must go on". Without hesitation, I guarantee most overseas employers who had experienced an Australian in their employ would jump at the case to offer a job to another. Australians are known for buckling down and getting on with it instead of talking or worrying about it. We work hard and we play hard, as I have been accused of.

So how did I become a metric expert? I didn't. I just had more knowledge than the average Canadian. Canada speaks French and English, but metric is a foreign word to them and they even struggle with the spelling e.g. millimeter instead of millimetre. The contrast is also interesting, they will say you are six feet high and weigh ninety kilos all in the same sentence. Canada drives at sixty kilometres an hour and but it is ten miles to the next town. Fuel is eighty cents a litre, but you buy a pound of ground beef. The mind boggles. Big brother across the border dictates a lot of the fear of metric, but also the government continually caves in to the vocal minority and doesn't stick to their guns. Plus the issue of conservatism that I mentioned earlier plays a large part in it. No one in Canada wants to offend anyone.

So there I was three years later claiming to be a metric expert when the last thing I looked at that was metric was the speed limit on the way to Brissy airport.

But that is only chapter one of my immigration story. Eventually the immigration department started to wise up to me and began to question just how good a metric teacher I was. Soon they said that I had to make up my mind and apply for landed status or move on. There still wasn't much activity going on at home so I decided to stay a while longer and went through the motions of becoming a 'landed ignorant'. When I eventually got landed immigration status I had to go across the border into the USA and back to validate my papers. I wanted to remember the date of the event so it was pretty close to St Patrick's Day and I thought that would make it easy to remember. The border near Vancouver can also get very busy so I decided to go down late at night. Again, you would have to be a genius to think of all the issues a border guard or immigration officer can come up with. But this one said to me, why are you crossing the border this late at night. I told him why, but he persisted and so I mentioned the St Paddy's date and how that would help me remember such a prestigious occasion. What came next was a shock because he said, now let me get this straight, you are an Australian, getting Canadian landed status, in America, and on an Irish holiday. Yes I replied, what is unusual about that. It was some major grovelling I then had to do as he thought I was completely loony and was going to refuse me entry, let alone the issue of him murmuring to other officials about my mental condition.

After receiving the landed status my mind also started to wander again, mainly in response to people's questions about how long was I staying? Especially my family who kept asking when I was coming home. The difficult hurdle was that I never intended to move to Canada. Sure I came to work and was happy to keep working, but I never intended to stay forever, and that was one thing that kept my parents going. Many years later and even with Canadian citizenship, a wonderful girlfriend and a house soon to be purchased, I am still not full committed to be in

Canada. I would be easy to choose if you were comparing an apple and an apple, but it isn't. Whilst the two countries have the same foundations, they are vastly different and it is like comparing an apple and an orange. Some day I want the apple, some day I want the orange. This indecision has led me to experience some of the most wonderful things in life and things I would never had seen ever, things which have changed me as a person. But I have also missed out on a lot in Australia, my mates' weddings, the birth of relatives, not being there to look after my father in ill health after he nurtured mine for so many years. Not being there for mum as she reinvented herself after as a widow. Lots of things, but essentially, no matter where I actually live, no matter how far I stray I still call Australia home and a fiercely patriotic and proud Australian. I may choose to live in Canada but my heart is in Australia, and always will be.

The entertaining thing is, I had to do a drawing in metric the other day. It took a very long time, to say the least.



After a downturn in the economy, **Andrew Adams** left Australia in 1992 seeking professional work in North America. Armed with a one-year work visa, he discovered there was endless experiences and adventure to be had in Canada and the visa soon became permanent residency. The change in government policy has allowed him to gain dual citizenship and he is now entrenched, with children and a house on the way. However, no matter where he resides, Australia will always his home.