

View from abroad is a tale of pride . . . and prejudice

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THEY still call Australia home with love and pride, but our 830,000 expatriates are frustrated.

Many feel deep disappointment about their homeland's isolation from the world, economic powerlessness and poor reputation on race relations and indigenous affairs.

As expatriate lobby groups mobilise to demand changes to Australia's electoral laws, *The Australian* surveyed a sample of expatriates and found pride in their roots is one factor that unites them.

"Australians are among the most loved people to walk the earth," says Sydney-born businessman Rob MacFarlane, who has lived in Los Angeles for 10 years.

"Australia tends to punch above its weight, with people in positions of influence all around the world," says banker Peter Trumper, 42, who heads ANZ's Japanese markets.

"Australians should be extremely proud," says Nina Blackwell, 29, who works as press secretary to New York mayoral candidate Peter Vallone. "The level of government services in Australia should be the envy of most of the world, especially the US."

But Australia is widely perceived as a racist nation that mistreats Aborigines, say expatriates such as Bangkok-based real estate agent Caroline Nelson.

"Many Asians associate the ideas of the One Nation party with the entire population of Australia," says Ms Nelson, 29.

In Tokyo, freelance writer Gabrielle Kennedy is often stunned by comments about Australia's poor indigenous record, particularly during discussions about Japan's wartime actions. "It's incredible the number of Japanese people who retaliate by saying 'What about what you did to the Aborigines?'"

Australia's treatment of Aborigines is well-publicised in the US, but the problem is not nearly so bad as America's race record, says Annie Austin, 49, a senior executive with business development company iFormation Group.

"In spite of Pauline Hanson and a layer of crass racism that's very obvious, Australia seems much more egalitarian from this distance."

Being a proud Aussie is not always a good thing. Australia is at risk of becoming too insular, many warn.

"You soon realise few countries outside Australia pay any attention to what is happening in Australia," says Arizona-based Paul Gall, manager of Australian golfer Aaron Baddeley.

Hong Kong-based engineer Peter Feain, 45, says Australia lacks global vision and needs to work harder at being internationally competitive.

"As much as I admire John Howard, I think of him as Lord Mayor of Sydney," Mr Feain says.

The common view in cities such as Bangkok is that Australia is not really interested in Asia, says Sydney-born lawyer Melisa Uremovic, 28.

"I don't think many Australians have grasped that we're in the middle of Asia."

Ms Austin says maybe we just need a bit more self-confidence.

"Everything seems somehow better if it's from overseas. That's a pity because our stuff looks pretty good from this vantage point."

Living overseas makes expats appreciate Australia's health care, education and government services.

"When you engage with a normal government service here (in the US), you expect to suffer, and generally you will," says Leigh Glover, 44, an energy and research associate at the University of Delaware.

But Australian personal taxes are "extremely high on a world scale," says New York-based consultant

Leanne Bouvet, 29.

The brain-drain of talented Australians overseas is nothing to worry about, says essayist Murray

Sayle, 75. "Either they will go back or they will send their kids back — and with them will come amazing skills," says Mr Sayle, who has lived in Japan for 27 years.

The dollar's stomach-churning dive is of great concern for many expats. "On the good side it has established Australian products here," says container terminal executive Richard Barclay, 59, who runs Asian Terminals' South Manila port.

And the republic?

Foreigners regard Australia as a little piece of England, says New York journalist Greg Truman, 41, deputy business editor of *Newsday*, the sixth-biggest paper in the US.

"We are not British, and we need to set the record straight internationally by changing our cultural and political institutions."

But where are we going? US researcher Mr Glover says: "Contemporary Australia seems rudderless."

But World Vision engineer Craig Crosby, 41, who clears unexploded bombs in Laos, says our turn is coming. "Australia's young minds are ahead of the industry," he says.

Interviews by: Stephen Lunn in Tokyo, Robert Lussetich in Los Angeles, Kimina Lyall in Bangkok, and Stephen Romei in New York.

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