

New Zealanders used to flock to Australia: what happened?

For much of the past 50 years, Australia was the big, brash neighbour with so much to offer – and Kiwis came in droves. But now it seems the tide is turning.

- Frank Robson
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The Tasman Sea, 1966: two brothers are bound from Wellington to Sydney on the cruise liner Angelina Lauro. Both in their teens, they're following a migratory pattern as predictable as those of long-haul seabirds, yet not to the brothers themselves. Innocent of almost everything, their abandonment of their tiny birthplace at the bottom of the world is largely instinctive; they have no sense of how completely it will change the course of their lives.

On the sleek blue Italian ship, the boys feast on delicacies they've never before experienced. Tall and skinny, with unruly hair and big hands and feet, they crudely alter their ages on their driver's licences so as to drink at the bar. The Australians they meet there seem confident and worldly. They have excellent tans and well-tailored clothes and speak rapidly in sharp, nasal tones that all but remove the need for lip movement.



Frank Robson. Photo: Nic Walker

In their cabin, the brothers practise speaking like ventriloquist Australians. They pore over Australian surf magazines, whose images of sparkling waves, white beaches and flax-haired girls are the closest thing they have to a plan. Unlike later generations who'll follow the same migratory path, the brothers have no great pride in the land they've left behind.

All they want is to escape their dysfunctional parents and the cold, slanting rain that seems to have been falling all their lives. Typical of young Pakehas of the era, they have scant knowledge of Maori culture or folklore, and were never taught to properly pronounce the Maori place names Australians on the ship find so amusing.



Australia beckoned Kiwis like the green light on Buchanan's Jetty, promising a bright future. Photo: Nic Walker

On their last night aboard the Kiwis wipe themselves out on icy Australian beer, twice as strong as New Zealand's tepid national brew. They emerge biliously onto the docks in Sydney, their worldly belongings in two broken suitcases. Within 24 hours they have spent most of their savings on an old Holden and two used surfboards, and are heading north up the coast.

They drift about for a couple of years, surfing famous breaks from Bells Beach to Noosa Heads. Being in Australia feels like emerging from a dark, damp thicket into an unimagined world bright with optimism and potential. The brothers work in factories and on building sites, befriending migrants, Aborigines and other fringe-dwellers, including "Leadfoot", a conscripted soldier who has run away from the army to avoid being sent to the war in Vietnam. When the motor in the brothers' car dies, Leadfoot (who has the same model Holden with a rusted-out body) combines the two heaps into one functioning vehicle, and the three mates travel on together.

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It's a turbulent period for Australia: Menzies has been succeeded by Harold Holt; the "White Australia" immigration policy is ending; a minimum wage has been introduced for "adult male" workers; decimal currency has arrived; Japan has replaced Great Britain as Australia's main trading partner, and an American spy satellite base is about to be built at Pine Gap in the Northern Territory.

Almost none of this is of much interest to the brothers until later, when they emerge from their somnolent period and come to see themselves as part of the new landscape. They meet

Australian partners, forge permanent occupations, have kids, vote, and accumulate the sort of official records that define the passage of lives.



Frank Robson on the gold coast about 1968/9. Photo: Courtesy of Frank Robson

Now, with their own parents long dead, the brothers are grandparents. Between them, they've helped to create 16 Australian citizens. Their Kiwi accents are gone, along with all family connections in the Land of the Long White Cloud, their board bumps and some of their teeth. As kids, they thought of Kiwis and Aussies as essentially one tribe – part of the same "family", as Julia Gillard would later suggest.

But both countries have changed a lot in recent decades, along with their inhabitants. In the 1960s and '70s, New Zealand was seen by the wider world as deeply conservative, socially isolated and basically broke – "Like a dimly-lit cemetery", as one American said of Auckland during World War II. Australia in the same era, with its vast mineral wealth, expanding cities and migrant-enriched population, beckoned Kiwis like the green light on Daisy Buchanan's jetty, promising a bright future and a "fair go" for all.

Somehow, though, the roles reversed: New Zealand reformed its economy, discovered its national identity and pride, celebrated and nurtured its Maori-Pakeha race relations, and rejected religious/conservative fear-mongering in favour of such progressive legislation as its 2013 marriage equality law.

Australia, alas, somehow lost itself amid the politics of envy and division engendered largely by its resources boom. From the 1980s, notions of egalitarianism and common good were largely forgotten in a class-crossing scrabble for wealth, status, influence. Having sown the seeds of this obsession, both major political parties became adroitly pragmatic in justifying and maintaining it, and to hell with problematic Aborigines, environmental threats and "illegal" refugees. Common decency, which ordinary people were *giving away* when the brothers arrived, has become the one commodity Australia can no longer afford.

Australia beckoned Kiwis like the green light on Daisy Buchanan's jetty, promising a bright future.

Woolloomooloo, Sydney, 2016: I don't see much of my big bro these days, even though we live near each other in south-east Queensland. Walking through Woolloomooloo on a wintry July morning, I can still picture him striding ahead of me up these torturous hillsides to the seedy little pub where we spent our first night in Oz.

Half a century later, I've come to Sydney – the focal point for the 25,000-odd Kiwis who move to Australia annually – to look at the evolving natures of the two nationalities. As an

Australian citizen who happened to have been born across the ditch, I'm sceptical of suggestions from Australian friends that New Zealanders have somehow become "better people" than us.

Yet last year, for the first time in two decades, more people from Australia moved to NZ than the other way around, with many citing employment, stable government, friendly, laid-back locals and "inspiring" race relations as factors behind the move. Conversely, Kiwis who moved here after 2001 (when the Howard government reacted to the myth of the Bondi Bludger by denying them welfare benefits, voting rights and almost any prospect of citizenship) are paying full taxes but being treated as second-class citizens.

The inequities affect all kinds of people, from Russell Crowe in his \$14-million Sydney harbourside apartment (denied citizenship in 2006 because he was overseas filming when Howard's 2001 crackdown was imposed), to battlers who ended up living on the streets as a consequence. In Bourke Street, Woolloomooloo, a short walk from Crowe's place, is a tiny reserve where homeless New Zealanders gather and sleep. None are around when I pass by, so I ask an elderly Aboriginal woman, packing up her bedroll under a railway bridge, if this is the area known as "Kiwi Park".

She nods. "But it was called Abo Park before it was called Kiwi Park," she says competitively. The woman is a member of the Stolen Generation. Plucked from her country in central Australia and brought to Sydney as a child, she still hasn't managed to find her way "home". Yet her concerns this morning are for a Fijian-born New Zealander, about to be deported to a detention centre under harsh new immigration rules introduced in 2014. "Come on, darlin'," she says to the absent man's young wife, standing forlornly nearby with her belongings. "Let's get your stuff packed up."

Walking on, I remember similar small acts of kindness extended to us by Indigenous Australians in the early part of our lost boys period. Race or ethnicity seemed to have no part in such impulses; it was more about our displaced status and their innate ability to recognise it.

In a Redfern hotel, three entrepreneurial expatriates talk of how liberated they feel to be free of New Zealand's "tall poppy" attitudes. It's an expression rarely heard here these days, perhaps because more people are looking down than up. Yet my companions – Brent Reihana, 50, Matthew Tukaki, 42, and Peter Brae, 58 – insist that behind their modest, no frills exteriors, most Kiwis secretly covet wealth and fame.

"We can come to Australia and redefine ourselves," says Tukaki, who arrived in Sydney 16 years ago from Upper Hutt with "a backpack and a credit card", and now owns EntreHub, an online news channel for small business. "No one here cares who we are or what we do ... all they care about is that we [New Zealanders] might [threaten] their own rise to the top."

What about the way Kiwis spurned stretch limos and other so-called symbols of success in the 1980s and '90s. Surely that wasn't the reaction of a nation driven by ambition?

Brae laughs knowingly. "They might have rejected limos, but they wanted them!"

Tukaki: "Oh, they wanted them all right ... yet when you succeed they think you've got tickets on yourself, then they knock you down! When I go home, the whole family thinks I'm like a multibillionaire. And they go, 'Hey bru, can you buy us a paddock?' "

A paddock?

"Yeah, you know, some land."

Like his friend Tukaki, Brent Reihana is a Maori who first came to Sydney 25 years ago from Kaitaia in NZ's far north, and now operates an enterprise called Maori Business Network. In his homeland, Reihana felt "inhibited" by family and cultural responsibilities. "You can express yourself here," he says, "whereas in New Zealand you've got to be more politically correct ... and depending on where you are in the family pecking order, [cultural obligations] can become a hell of a responsibility. I know a lot of Maori who say the same thing."

Brae, a Pakeha, came here with his wife in 1983 from Wellington and saw a market for Kiwi "nostalgia food". They now have a business called New Zealand Snack Food and Kiwi Bakery, selling such curious morsels as Black Balls, Pinky bars, Chocolate Fish, onion soup, whitebait, kina and "pies with attitude". The demand for this stuff is indicative of the way many New Zealanders never really "leave" home but drag bits of it around with them, as though nothing elsewhere could match up. They form their own communities, churches and business networks, and tend – even after decades overseas – to interpret everything through the prism of their Kiwiness.

Why not embrace the society they've adopted? Or are they trying to turn Australia into New Zealand?

"Of course we are!" cries Tukaki. "It's the great southern island, brother, our home away from home. Our culture is intrinsic ... we bring our work ethic, our desire to succeed. We can be the tall poppy here, and no one's gunna pull us down!"

Their most maddening displays of parochialism, of course, are unleashed by rugby union's All Blacks, whose serial thrashings of the Wallabies (and everyone else) fill Kiwis with the sort of vengeful joy only long-humiliated little brothers and sisters truly understand.

"The greatest team of all time!" crows Reihana.

"And look at the NRL players," hoots Tukaki. "They're nearly all Kiwis, too. You Aussies can't even muster some rugby league talent!"

"The All Blacks are where my heart is," Brae's wife, Val (who has just joined us), murmurs passionately.

Australians don't fare too well in their assessment of trans-Tasman character traits, either. Although "refreshingly frank", they're also "blunt, loud as hell, sore losers, lazy, whingers, bad sports" and given to playing "the white father" among smaller neighbouring nations.

And Kiwis?

Tukaki hunches forward, all but licking his lips. "The difference between us and everyone else," he says, "is our desire to maintain a sense of humanity. We're pretty f...ing cool. We're not arrogant about it, but geez we're pretty sweet, eh?"

And pretty smug?

Tukaki gives me an injured look. "I wouldn't go 'smug', no. But I mean, we are what we are. We're a country at the bottom of the f...ing planet, with penguins! We're a country with

skilled migration, not a country with convicts. And we're culturally rich and diverse, and that plays into how we perform on the global stage. We took our culture to the world in the 1980s, and we still do. It's fantastic! I love it!"

He exchanges another triumphant fist bump with Reihana, and is back in Aussie-bashing mode when a bar worker, collecting our glasses, rolls his eyes.

Me: "What can we do with these Kiwis?"

Bar worker: "I dunno about you, but I'm calling immigration."

During my schooldays, minute details about the Treaty of Waitangi were droningly recited by teacher after teacher, while the rest of us gazed from windows wondering when the rain would stop. These days, New Zealand's founding document, signed in 1840 by agents of the British Crown and a group of Maori chiefs, is celebrated as the main reason contemporary race relations are largely harmonious, while the plight of Australia's Indigenous owners remains a source of internal shame and international condemnation.

The treaty gave Maori full rights of ownership of their lands, forests, fisheries and other possessions. And though still hotly debated in some quarters, it remains a key element in the shaping of the nation. Another difference in the make-up of the two countries is the nature of their women.

"In Australia, New Zealand women are probably thought of as a bit pushy," ventures Shona Martyn, the NZ-born publishing director of HarperCollins Australia. "But they're actually quite normal in New Zealand. I'm quite sure some people think this about me: quite normal in New Zealand, but a bit pushy here ... in Australia, the bulk of women who've ascended to power are sort of there mopping up after there's been some slightly average guy."

A resident of Sydney since 1983, Martyn believes her country's settlement by Scottish Presbyterians, whose matriarchal, Temperance Movement women tended even then to run their households, provided core feminist principles for later generations. (New Zealand women were the first in the world to gain voting rights in 1893, followed by Australia federally in 1902, and Finland in 1906.)

"My dad's mother insisted, even in the 1920s-'30s, that boys participate in the household chores," says Martyn, a former journalist, at her corporate eyrie in Sydney's CBD. "New Zealand women have been historically more confident. They're very strong-minded, and they're not shy ... that [background] is very different from the sort of Irish Catholic migrant families, and more conventional English families, that settled here."

Martyn, who identifies as a Kiwi, believes Jane Campion's 1993 cinematic triumph, *The Piano*, captures the "Gothic darkness" within the national psyche. "I don't know if it's the weather, or the Scottish heritage, but there is a darkness, a negativity thing, a glass-half-empty thing; Australians are more relaxed, they'll confront issues and try to get them sorted, whereas some New Zealanders tend to be a bit morose."

They're also fascinated by stories and films about themselves, and their country. NZ publishers devised a special genre – "heartland books" – to meet this nation-alistic hunger. "One of the most successful books to come out of the Christchurch earthquake was called *Quake Dogs*," laughs Martyn. "It's about dogs who survived the quake, with beautiful

colour pics and little pen portraits saying things like, 'Buster was lying under the ironing board when the quake came ...' "

Like countless Kiwis, Martyn grew to love Australia for its own quirks, and its acquired-taste landscapes. "It took a long time before I could see the beauty of the eucalypt forests," she admits. "But now I do, I really do." Yet on her last business trip to NZ, when she drove from Auckland south to Cambridge across the Hauraki Plains, something about the verdant pastures and plump, contented cows struck her as reassuring.

"I felt quite safe there. Maybe it was after all the mayhem across the world, but there was a point during that trip when I did start thinking there was a vulnerability around Sydney, and that I could always come back to New Zealand."

And will she?

"Probably not. It's too small-minded in some ways, and parochial. I see Australia, and Sydney in particular, as part of the world. If you walk on the streets, there are people who live here who are from many other places. Walk on the streets in New Zealand and all you tend to see are lots of happy visitors buying Kathmandu tops and stuff."

New Zealand's inclination not to be "part of the world" – typified by its long ban on visits by nuclear vessels – continued when it refused under Labour's then-PM Helen Clark to join the Coalition of the Willing in invading Iraq in 2003. "When all other Western nations were buying into the WMD [weapons of mass destruction] propaganda, that was a highlight of my career," says Jocelyn Prasad, Clark's media adviser at the time. (As it turned out, the decision to dodge the stooged-up Iraq war, along with a massive boost from "Tolkien tourism", enhanced New Zealand's image as a sane, safe destination in an otherwise scary world, especially, and most ironically, within the US. It's now topping global house price rises.)

Born in Auckland, Prasad joined Clark's staff soon after meeting her future husband, Australian Chris Niesche (then NZ correspondent for *The Australian*) in Wellington. Now living in Sydney with their nine-year-old son, Hari, the wryly combative pair see one another as typical of their nationalities.

"Kiwis are keenly interested in what the rest of the world thinks about them, in the way Australians were 25 years ago," Niesche observes. "If there's an article about Wellington in *The New York Times* travel section, that's almost cause for national celebration." They're also more earnest, open, friendly and trusting people who "smoke a lot of pot and always dress as though they're going for a hike, even if they're just sitting around at home".

Even before moving here eight years ago, Prasad, from an Fijian-Indian family, saw Aussies as brash, assured, cocky, and more inclined to racism than New Zealanders. Her first Sydney job, as a media officer with the Labor state government under premier Morris Iemma, didn't improve that view: "It was a really rude awakening. I was told early in the piece, 'We're a lot more right wing 'ere!' – but I still wasn't ready for the level of cynicism. Eddie Obeid [later found to be corrupt] was a government minister then, and it was pretty astounding to see how those processes worked. I got laid off eight months later."

Niesche tops up our drinks before returning fire.

Kiwis, he suggests, like to go on about how much more tolerant they are than "racist" Australians because it makes them feel good about their own lives. "It's true they've led the way in race relations, but if you go to regional areas you'll find racism. I met a couple of

white guys in a bar in Rotorua, the Maori cultural hub of New Zealand, and they were the most appalling racists I've ever encountered."

Prasad concedes she brought her prejudices about Australia with her. "Australians are hard to get to know in a meaningful way," she says, "... and I felt that anyone who didn't like me was either sexist or racist, or both."

Her husband rolls his eyes, but Prasad admits she even considered using his surname on her job applications to see if it helped: "A lot of Asians here just change their names to make their lives easier. My early default position in Australia was that people were racist until they proved differently."

Niesche: "That's outrageous!"

Prasad laughs. "Well, that's how I felt, although it has changed now that I've made some good friends here."

In Australia, he counters, "... rednecks are proud. They're happy to stand up and say they voted for Pauline Hanson because that's who they are. But in New Zealand no one will admit to that sort of thing, just like no one admits to voting for Winston Peters." (A Maori-Pakeha politician who opposes Asian migration, Peters is leader of the New Zealand First party.)

Like his admission that he didn't know the capital of NZ until shortly before being sent there as a correspondent, Niesche's closing anecdote suggests that if chauvinism were a sport, Australia would rarely lose. It involves a newly-arrived Australian he accompanied to a sporting event in Wellington, where a soloist sang the national anthem in Maori. "The Australian was so unused to hearing an Indigenous language, she turned to me and said, 'This guy's really pissed. I can't understand a word he's saying!' "

Near the end of a recent piece castigating Australia, writer and columnist Elizabeth Farrelly (NZ-born and Sydney-based) took her foot off the throat to confess: "But I wouldn't consider living anywhere else, especially not in a place where things are 'nice'. I am easily bored and I find 'nice' excruciating."

Exactly. In the late '60s, not long after my brother fell in love and gave up being a surf bum, I returned to New Zealand and bullshitted my way into journalism on a regional daily. But the place was so dull and self-absorbed I fled back to Oz and scored a job on the outrageous Melbourne *Truth*. The newsroom was like a microcosm of the sprawling, delinquent land I'd lost my heart to: full of clatter and irreverence, with its pedal to the metal and little time for navel gazing.

On my first day, noticing that the editor was wearing a gorilla suit, I asked a colleague why that was.

"F... knows, matey," he grinned, clapping me on the shoulder. "But tomorrow the silly c... will be wearing something else. So who cares?"