

# HOW TO BE UNAUSTRALIAN

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The border is marked by an ordinary unpainted paling fence. This is the sort of fence you would find in any 1950s suburban backyard, splintery, unpretentious. It's the sort of fence that Prime Ministers are proud of. Because this is not just any old fence. This particular fence is the one that Australians whisper about, warn their children about, threaten their miscreants with. It's the fence that Australians must never be on the wrong side of, the fence between Australia and Unaustralia.

As a matter of fact, until recently, very few people ever saw the fence. You either were on the right side of it, or you weren't, but no-one ever told you where it was. That is about to change. A great coming-together is happening, a gathering at the fence. There has been a conference already<sup>1</sup>. The cartographers are massing, the cultural theorists, the historians. With them will be the media, lights flashing, laptops poised. And not far behind will be the script writers for *Adventure Holiday*, the discount bus tours, the casting agents for *Big Brother*.

Will it be a chance to bring the fence down? Will we swarm over it? Will we pull each other up from both sides, perch on top, singing and cheering? Will we cry? Will we souvenir splinters of grey wood?

John Howard has ushered in a bright new anti-terrorist epoch. Sedition is flourishing. Unaustralian activity is set to peak. You don't even have to know that you're doing it. Neither courage nor conscience is essential. I can do it. You can do it. Where it will all end? Sedition laws produce sedition. The numbers are growing, the pressure on the fence is acute. Something will have to give.

This is the right historic juncture, the pivotal moment, for a historical and ethnographic survey. Unaustralia, circa 2007.

Broadly, there are three categories of citizenship. You can be born Unaustralian, you can be banished to Unaustralia, or you can acquire citizenship by choice.

In the first category are the original inhabitants. Their behaviour, from the very outset, has been deeply Unaustralian. They still exhibit an unsporting insistence on prior ownership. They object to being shot at and poisoned, but also to being ignored. They have been singularly resistant to attempts to make them and their children whiter. Their protracted intransigence suggests that they may be unalterably Unaustralian. Claims of injustice make Australia uncomfortable and irritated. Historians, in particular, have become chronically agitated. Australia is based on mateship, therefore injustice is impossible. Anyway, it is in poor taste to mention such things. Australia only looks forward.

At the other end of the spectrum are the people who were not born in Australia, particularly if their first language is not English. The most famous of these, famous in Unaustralia, was Egon Kisch. He tried to get into Australia in 1934 to talk about peace, an obviously suspicious activity. He spoke dozens of languages, including English, but Australia caught him out. He couldn't pass a dictation test in Gaelic<sup>2</sup>, so he was refused entry. His consequent leg-breaking leap from the ship to the Melbourne dock is little known in Australia, but will always be celebrated in

Unaustralia.

The Kisch incident was particularly mystifying to Gaelic speakers of the time, since it seemed to imply an official Australian enthusiasm and endorsement for their language. This was not something to which they were accustomed.

Those who do gain entry to Australia, who learn English and remain for many generations, often come to regard themselves as Australian. They should be wary. If Australia should suddenly go to war with the country of their ancestors, they may find that they are Unaustralian after all. This has happened to Australians of German and Italian heritage. People of Japanese heritage suffered the same fate, but they, like the Chinese, weren't Australian anyway, war or no war, wealth or no wealth.

So speaking English is crucial. But speaking English too well is also suspect. Australia doesn't like a plummy accent, unless you are actually the Queen, or Robert Gordon Menzies.

Recently a wave of people has tried to get into Australia without visas. They would once have been known as refugees, but are now called illegal immigrants. They assume, from a reading of early Australian history, that arrival without a visa or any other permission is a tried and true method of entry. This was true only six times (once for each Australian colony), and is no longer the case.

Those born Jewish or Muslim are unlikely to become fully Australian, but Catholicism is a more complex issue. Some quite well-known Catholics have passed as Australian. However, on balance, citizenship of Australia is more likely to result from an education at Scotch College, than from an education at Dandenong Star of the Sea.

In general, women are born Unaustralian. They bleed and give birth in messy ways. They are uncomfortable reminders of weakness and intimacy, and they have breasts. Breasts can only be made Australian by means of loud guffaws. And a woman can only be Australian if she can take a joke, probably a joke about breasts.

Appearance is important. Accidents of birth, such as a misplaced nose, or insufficient motor control over your tongue, are Unaustralian. So is poverty. Some people are born to this condition, and will have to work extremely hard if they want to be Australian. Others are not born poor, but somehow fail to make a go of it in the Lucky Country. They don't learn to read, or they lose their jobs.

Illness, like accident, is frowned upon in Australia. A malfunctioning body is as bad as a damaged brain or a lost limb. A certain amount of health care will be provided, but after that you're on your own. Not having private health insurance or sufficient superannuation, is, per se, Unaustralian. And shuffling around the streets without a home will not be tolerated. Nor will dandruff, dirty clothes or disembodied voices.

This brings us to the secondary category of Unaustralian citizenship, achieved through banishment. Many sorts of behaviour lead to this. Laughing too much or too little, arguing with invisible people, farting loudly (silent is fine, just look somewhere else), crying in public, in fact crying almost anywhere, these are Unaustralian. Such behaviour is generally only Australian if you are on prescription drugs or drunk. In both of those cases a great deal of profit is generated, so the behaviour is encouraged. And it should be noted that Prime Ministers may cry discreetly on appropriate occasions.

Ageing is also unacceptable. Aged Australians gradually disappear. They become Unaustralian shadows. When did you last see a woman over fifty in Australia? Even ageing men get very blurry round the edges, although it happens decades later than it does with women. A particularly powerful white male, an ex Prime Minister

perhaps, may still be partially visible well into his seventies, but then even he will fade.

Banishment is the lot of all the outcasts, the whipping boys, the punching bags and the scapegoats. Here you have your artists, your book-worms, your queers, your bikies, your people who don't care about sport, your lunatics, your transgressors of every sort.

Many people have found themselves Unaustralian simply because of timing. They drank wine instead of beer at a time when wine was Wog or effete. They were clean-shaven when beards were all the go, or vice versa. They lived in sin at a time when marriage was essential. These fashions are always subject to change. At present wine is okay in Australia; goatees are acceptable, but not full beards; and marriage is making a comeback, though only for heterosexuals.

There are some interesting late entrants for second category Unaustralian-ness. Take the case of North Americans. They, the white ones anyway, seem prima facie to be excellent candidates for Australian citizenship. But they are let down by what Australia sees as brashness. Hubris. Many North Americans have become hapless citizens of Unaustralia as a result of a basic misunderstanding. They don't realise that "you really think you're something, don't you?" is not a compliment, but an insult.

The Unaustralians mentioned so far are a motley bunch, uneasy neighbours, tripping over each other. Some are no longer even alive. Unaustralia might be seen as a sort of populous ant heap, a shanty town on Australia's great rubbish dump. Perhaps this is the sort of scene that Marcus Wills had in mind when he painted last year's Archibald Prize winner – his landscape in the form of a huge craggy skull, occupied by thousands of scurrying figures?<sup>3</sup>

And that's even before we consider the third category of citizenship. This category is reserved for the voluntary exiles, the resisters. Oh dear. The ones who don't own cars or televisions; who didn't buy shares in Telstra; who don't believe that they need new clothes, body parts, outdoor settings, bed linen, hair, iPods, renovations. They fail to consume more petrol, more air-conditioning, more packaging, more travel, more progress, more growth. They are termites. They undermine the Australian economy. They are probably the very same flat-earthers who think that nuclear power is dangerous. They don't realise that Australia rides on the bulldozer's back.

But there are some even more depraved than the passive resisters. Deep in the left eye-socket dwell the dissenters and the outright seditious, the protestors, the ratbags, the people who don't approve of war, or don't believe that the official enemy is the right enemy. The people who believe too deeply in anything (other than God - the right God, that is). There are the men who wrote "No War" on the Opera House, the people who sit in trees in defiance of chainsaws. There are the hippies wreathed in aromatic smoke, still hoping that love is enough. There are organisers with minutes and petitions and phone trees and fundraising lamingtons. There are the women in scruffy 1983 sarongs making mandalas with wire from the dismantled gates of Pine Gap. There are unionists defending a precarious hundred years' worth of decent pay and conditions. There are Trots and Fenians and Fabians and Communists. There are academics and intellectuals, poor old things. So dusty, so hoarse. It's not that you can't speak, in Australia. It's just that no one is listening. To find that in any way odd, that's what is Unaustralian.

There is Wilfred Burchett. In 1945 he filed the first media report from the ashes of Hiroshima: "I write this as a warning to the world"<sup>4</sup>. He didn't approve of Australian incursions into Korea (and later Vietnam) either, and said so. This was going much too far. Korea was the enemy of the moment. No-one could actually

name a law that Burchett had broken, but nevertheless, in 1955 Australia revoked his passport, and refused to give it back for 17 years.

Mary McKillop, though an unlikely companion for Wilfred Burchett, should be mentioned here in order to illustrate the diversity of dissent. She is Unaustralian not just by virtue of being Catholic and a woman, but also because of her refusal to knuckle under to her own church hierarchy. Recently, fame has lent her a great measure of Australian-ness. However an honorary kneeler is reserved for her in Unaustralia. Australian-ness is an uncertain and fickle quality.

This left eye socket is a densely populated part of Unaustralia. After all, sedition is as old as Australia. The First Fleet was made up of Unbritish misfits. The early governors hoped, with a peculiarly British hope, that hard work, fresh air and plenty of flogging would turn these malcontents into upright citizens. It was a bit like Scouting, and it didn't entirely work.

A graph of sedition over the last two hundred years would correspond to various peaks in the population of Unaustralia. A previous all-time high occurred in the 1950s when Menzies tried to outlaw Communism. This led to some very bloody border skirmishes, and a sharp rise in Unaustralian-ness. One unexpected outcome of Menzies' efforts was that Unaustralia formalised and strengthened its diplomatic ties with Un-everywhere-else, in particular Unamerica, which was prospering at that time.

The following two decades, remembered so fondly by Australian leaders as a period of great stability, actually produced a steady flow of Unaustralian activities. There was Zelda D'Aprano, chained to the doors of the Commonwealth Offices, demanding equal pay for women, refusing to pay more than two thirds of the fare on the tram. Or Jo Davies, throwing her shoe at Harold Holt in disgust. There were young men refusing to register for conscription. And there were still the diehards living in rented houses and thinking that Poseidon was something to do with the sea.

In the 1970s the sedition graph peaked again. Even walking down the street, in a group of more than two, became illegal in some parts of Australia. It was a time when the anger and the aromatic smoke and the belief in love and the disbelief in war all came together. The result was a hope that Gough Whitlam could change Australia forever.

Australia proved obdurate, but the bending and denting continues. People write letters and paint slogans and hold meetings. Women stand in shop doorways yelling "nothing in this shop fits me", and refuse to give their grandsons plastic guns. Legions of Indigenous resisters, in a tradition stretching from Yagan, to the Wave Hill Gurindji, to Lowitja O'Donoghue, refuse to be silenced. Ordinary people turn out in droves to cross bridges and protest against wars.

The present peak was ushered in by the laws of 2005. Already there has been a latter-day Kisch. A North American called Scott Parkin, a dangerous pacifist, tried to get into Australia in 2005. He objected to some well known companies profiting from the war in Iraq. *But how can they help it?* asked Australia, outraged. *It's their business.* Scott was speedily deported, but will always be welcome in Unaustralia.

Statistics about actual deportations are scarce, since the media tends to be coy about the issue. If it happens in the middle of the night, and a child gazes forlornly from a plane window, as with the Bahktiari family in 2004, it will be publicised. But usually these things are managed more discreetly. Anyway the Bahktiaris were foreigners in the first place, and therefore Unaustralian by definition.

In spite of all these numerous categories of Unaustralian-ness, you still see many people in the streets of Australia. So are they the real thing, your actual

Australians?

On the whole, no. They are passing as Australians, but they are Unaustralian. They are the immigrant workers, they keep the cogs of Australia oiled and turning, but they are not citizens. At best, they hold temporary visas.

Unaustralians in most (not all) categories find it easy to get an Australian visa. Take the case of a lesbian. Lesbianism is not necessarily visible. A lesbian who is white, and preferably middle class, is definitely eligible for a visa. But there is a price. In this case, the price is that she doesn't make a fuss. Making a fuss is extremely Unaustralian. Making a fuss might mean wanting to hold hands with another woman in public, for instance. Also, she must agree never to mention the word lesbian anywhere near a school. Apparently if young girls hear it, there is no stopping them, which is very worrying for the Australian authorities.

The situation is a little different for gay men. They can choose the flamboyant, big-in-the-arts option, preferably with a bit of shamanistic cross-dressing, but there is a price for that too. Like women, gay men must be able to take a joke. And if the joke becomes a toe-cap in the ribs, well what can you expect?

Border policing is a simple matter: the occasional anonymous insult, a gob of spit, scrawled words of disgust or hatred. These are perennial reminders of the crackle of flames at the feet, the jolt of the ECT machine.

Unaustralians know what happens if you breach visa conditions. You don't become a citizen of Unaustralia, or Unanywhere, without knowing about fear.

For all Unaustralians in Australia there is a tiredness that comes with never being completely at ease, the tiredness of any traveller in a foreign land. But nevertheless, here we all are, passing as Australian, keeping our mouths shut, or not. Most of us have to get by in Australia as best we can. Joy, comfort and the home-fires are in Unaustralia. But the jobs are in Australia.

Some rapid mental arithmetic (population of Australia minus population of Unaustralia) will make it obvious that the number of bona fide Australian citizens is not great. So who are they? Where is this tiny group of healthy clean-shaven white neo-con heterosexual Protestant English-speaking sports-loving men who aren't too old, and who believe what Prime Ministers tell them? And how do they get away with it?

The answer, of course, is that they don't. They pay a price too.

It's not just that they'll never get through the pearly gates (all those little fibs). They pay a price right here and now. It's their joints. When did you last see a Prime Minister open his mouth more than a centimetre, or turn his head on his neck? That's why they can't see the past, and that's why Australia can only look forward. They are afraid. In spite of all that clenching, they still feel the cold trickle of fear. They have built a little box and called it normal, and they are trying to live in it. But they don't fit. They can't fit. No one can.

There is an old lesbian-feminist slogan, *we are the women our mothers warned us about*. All Unaustralians understand this. It's the badge of citizenship in Unaustralia, it's what makes us free. There is nothing left to fear because *the bogeyman is us!*

It's a message we could share with those poor few, those pale Australians, huddled in their box. *Come out! Don't be scared. It is not too late to join us. We can't let you run the country, or the ABC, but we can retrain you, teach you some decent Unaustralian values. Join us here, on the wrong side of the fence. Really, you'll like it.*

- 1 'Unaustralia', The Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference, Dec 2006
- 2 The dictation test was a device used at the time to distinguish Unaustralians from potential Australians.
- 3 'The Paul Juraszek Monolith (after Marcus Gheeraerts)'
- 4 Wilfred Burchett 'Passport: an Autobiography', Thomas Nelson, Melbourne 1969