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Senate Inquiry on the Status of Australian Expatriates, 2004
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This short submission has several elements:

- a) It puts forward a view of what it is to be 'an Australian', and hence what it may mean to be an expatriate Australian. The view expressed might be somewhat at variance with the normal assumptions of nationality, and hence the premises which a Legal and Constitutional Committee could bring to bear on the status of Australian expatriates.
- b) It outlines my own circumstance (at various points in the paper), as a particular instance of an expatriate Australian. This includes some suggestion of why I became an expatriate, and why I continue to be one.
- c) It indicates why an individual such as myself can make a greater contribution to general Australian prosperity and security by contributing as an expatriate rather than as an Australian domestic resident.
- d) It itemizes several handicaps in the Australian civil context encountered by expatriates such as myself.

1. The Concepts of Nationality and Culture

A nation state in its modern incarnation is essentially a fortress surrounded by a wall. Those who are born within the wall, or who are admitted by special dispensation, are said to be nationals of that fortress. Those without are held to be foreign, and may be denied civil rights to varying degrees (sometimes entirely). A traditional view of the nation fortress is that it is legitimized in the last resort by force of arms, rather as tribal units have always been legitimized. A more modern moral-economic argument is that the inhabitants within the nation fortress support its functions by service and taxation, and therefore have exclusive or prior call on its protection. Many other assumptions underpin the concept that members of the nation fortress form some indivisible and unique unit. It is common to identify these unifying assumptions by the collective term 'culture'.

I was born in Australia in 1945, which I consider to be a piece of extreme good fortune, for it has been a country essentially at peace during my lifetime. My

origins however were poor, and my parents moved constantly. Therefore the privilege and settled friendships which give some an essential start in life were not part of my experience. Well, humans are adaptable animals. I have spent nineteen years of my adult life outside of Australia, studying and working. That has given me a fairly sharp perspective on the fortress mentality of nation states, the often complacent values of those within their borders, and the whole concept of what it is to be a member of a nation, or a culture.

A culture is a design for living. Or rather, it is a vague statement about an average design for living adopted by a certain group of people. Clearly, there are myriad constituents to this design, and any given individual only relates to certain of those constituents in some greater or lesser degree. It is a convenient political fiction to claim that there is an essential 'core' to any national culture, the umbra of the giant Venn diagram as it were, and that the penumbra is somehow suspect.

I take a rather more dispersed view of cultural participation, Australian or otherwise. On any particular constituent of the cultural design, I would see individuals distributed on a normal (bell) curve. Those less attached to bar raffles, Akubra hats, Australian idioms .. or whatever, would be on the wings of the curve, with some issue-majority clustering at the centre. Some of that cultural minority on issue X or Y will be mad and bad. Others will already treading new paths that the majority will follow in a generation or two.

The argument which I wish to put to the Senate Committee is that the concept of a nation as fortress is, in large part, destructive and counter-factual both at individual and institutional levels. It is destructive because any institution which creates a sharply defined perimeter of in-groups and out-groups also generates a standing invitation to conflict. Human history is riven with tragic examples, from tribal and religious sects to the sociopathic behaviour needed to sustain most empires.

The nation as fortress concept is counter-factual in the current geopolitical context because to survive at all, every modern state has had to cede an increasing amount of sovereignty to multinational organizations. Only some of those organizations pretend to be state owned (whatever that means). Many of the most powerful are private corporations, and virtually all of those have long ceased to loyally support the functions of fortress nation states through service and taxation. The Committee will be aware that the proportional contributions of companies to national tax revenues have plunged precipitously in most OECD countries since the 1950s, throwing an ever increasing burden on hapless worker-consumers. The collateral casualties of the now brittle fortress state policies of exclusion are not predatory corporations but individuals who also attempt to be mobile across the surviving barriers.

There is an alternative, more flexible and resilient concept of nationality to that of the fortress nation. It requires no idealism at all to observe that the human family is just that, a family, on a very crowded planet. The most successful rooms in this big family mansion are not the xenophobic exclusionist enclaves like North Korea (nor, in its present mode, an increasingly xenophobic America). No, the most successful and sought after rooms are those where the inhabitants have friends and relatives scattered right through the house, passing back gossip and inside tips, and quietly calming the tempers when the folk around them don't understand why Australia (or whoever) seems to be acting in a dumb or bastard way. These outlander friends and relatives frequently have to tolerate a lot of local insularity, racism and discrimination themselves, so they are not thrilled when the home front puts up barriers too. Any national nastiness manifested by their country of origin rebounds doubly on them, often in very personal ways.

2. An Expatriate Life and Its Contribution to Australia

I have chosen to live where cultures and nations overlap, on the wings of all those normal curves, an outsider. My sense has always been that it is in these peripheral regions, where nothing can be taken for granted, where ideas clash and blend, that the seeds of our future humanity lie. Am I a parasite, a dropout, a "value-free" virus? One hopes not.

I have written tens of thousands of words in stories, interpreting China and Korea through Australian eyes, and these stories have been read by many tens of thousands of people from over a hundred countries (see <http://thormay.net/>). Nowadays I play by the title of Visiting Professor in Applied Linguistics with the specific job of preparing Korean and other international graduates to complete overseas Masters degrees in TESOL . In fact, my course website specifically directs them to Australian universities (<http://thormay.net/lxes/tesol/index.htm> ; <http://home.pufs.ac.kr/~thormay/australiancentres.htm>) for which I get neither thanks nor payment, and of I am their present idea of what an Australian amounts to. Those graduates in turn will go on to teach English throughout South Korea and Asia, carrying a little bit of "Australia" in the corners of their brains.

3. Civil Handicaps Which Derive from Expatriate Status

So what is the downside to being an Australian working overseas, specifically in South Korea?

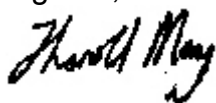
1. I am likely to lose legal 'resident' privileges when I do make return trips to Australia, even though I am arguably making a far greater contribution to Australian welfare and its economy that I could as a 58 year old, probably unemployable man inside Australia.

2. Australia has been unable or unwilling to conclude an exchange superannuation/pension agreement with South Korea. That means my compulsory contributions to the South Korean pension fund will be forfeited when I leave, and my already anaemic share of the Australian superannuation system will be worthless.

3. My particular lifestyle has made it non-viable to either seek or commit to taking out a mortgage on residential property in Australia. That is, such savings as I have (well below the Australian average for a man of my education) have had to remain liquid. Several years ago, after returning from a lecturing position in the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, I found that unemployment benefits were not available to tide me over while I found a new job. The argument was that I should consume my meagre capital instead. A non-mobile Australian who had been able to put such savings into a house deposit would not have been penalized in this way. I found this whole paradigm (and the righteous attitude of officials which went with it) to be grotesquely inequitable. I am anticipating a very threadbare retirement.

Well that's the bad news. The good news is that I have a happy, productive job and all the fascination of learning about other lifestyles while my Australian contemporaries go pear-shaped in front of their goggle boxes and have heart attacks. Things looked less personally optimistic eight years ago when I made a submission to the Australian Senate in 1996 on the Senate Inquiry Into The Status of Teachers (<http://thormay.net/politics/politic2.html>), or in 1998 when I was forced out of the Australian teaching profession, essentially as a casualty of Victorian politics (<http://thormay.net/lxesl/teach9.html>).

Regards, Thor May



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