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Australia remains part of us

Ask an Australian at home how many Australians live overseas, and you'll usually get answers ranging from under 100,000 to about 500,000. Very few people know that the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade estimates that there are about 860,000 Australians living overseas.

I am one of the estimated five hundred Australians living in Belgium. We are a tiny and dispersed fraction of our country's total diaspora, resident in a nation of 10.26 million inhabitants. Belgium is a miniscule country, with a surface area of just 32,545 square kilometres. Australia, by contrast, has 20 million inhabitants, in a surface area about 237 times as large.

Not many Australians realise that less than a century ago, there were thousands of Australians in Belgium for a protracted period, during the First World War. It seems to be a feature of Belgium's tiny nature that it is often overlooked. Even Australia's official war historian Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, who was present on the Western Front as well as at Gallipoli and left us the extraordinary twelve-volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, didn't mention Belgium in the title of any of his books, although his four volumes on Australian operations in France do relate what took place there: Australians fought and died in huge numbers in Belgian Flanders. My father is the proud owner of a complete set of Bean's *History*, acquired, I believe, before I was born. As a child growing up in Canberra, I was in awe of these impressive missives which had pride of place on the family bookshelf. It is only in my adulthood, as a result of living in Belgium and visiting sites in Belgium and France on the Western Front, that I have begun to understand the importance of that war for Australia as a nation.

The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was on active service in France and Belgium from March 1916 until the end of the war. On the Menin Gate alone, at Ypres (called 'Ieper' in Flemish), in the modern Belgian province of West Flanders, are inscribed the names of 6176 Australians who did not return home. Since 1928, except for a break during the German occupation of Ypres in the Second World War, every night at 8 pm, whatever the weather, the Last Post is played at the Menin Gate. In total 59,330 Australians died in the First World War, and most AIF men who reached the Western Front between 1916 and 1918 would have passed through Ypres, although probably all most of them saw was a pile of rubble. Australian servicemen are buried in 163 cemeteries in Belgium, including 1368 in Tyne Cot Cemetery, in Passchendaele, the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world.

Napoleon met his Waterloo in Belgium, and there's a quirky Australian connection there too: legend has it that the great C E W Bean was extremely impressed as a child when his father took him to visit the historic Waterloo battlefield, which is just a few kilometres south of Brussels. The Australian War Memorial website tells us that 'His experience at Waterloo was a foretaste of the labours that would occupy most of his adult life: the establishment of the Australian War Memorial and the writing of the official history of Australia during the First World War'. So the man who probably did more to establish the Anzac legend than any other individual in our history had an important connection with Belgium from a young age.

Perhaps Bean didn't devote a volume of his History specifically to Belgium because the border between France and Belgium was inconsequential for his purposes at that time. What mattered was the Front, and the AIF's area of operations was from Nieuport in Belgium to east of St Quentin, in France. In mid 1917, this section of the Front would have been a distance of about 250 kilometres. While the war was about territory, and therefore about national boundaries, the territorial gains along the Front were amazingly small over several years despite the enormous human cost.

Today, you can move between Belgium and France and other continental EU countries almost without noticing it. There are no border

controls on the road and if you're looking the other way or dozing off in the car you'll miss the signs announcing you've arrived in another country. With Euros in your pocket, you don't need to stop to change money anymore.

This modern phenomenon of a 'borderless Europe' is the positive legacy of two world wars in which Australians fought and died. Following the Second World War, the European Coal and Steel Community was created on the initiative of the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, who declared on 9 May 1950 that 'the coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany' and proposed as a first step that Franco-German production of coal and steel be placed under a common High Authority. A few years later, the European Economic Community—today's EU—was created by the same original six nations: Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg. The idea behind the concept was to economically integrate these nations to such an extent that they could never go to war against each other again.

Brussels, a city of a million people dating back to 977 AD, is the heart of the European Union, and its central role in a united Europe is the reason I live there now. It is the seat of many of the European institutions and NATO. I first came to Brussels in the northern summer of 1992 on a university excursion with my European Law class from Hamburg where I was doing a Masters while on a German government post-graduate scholarship. As part of the trip, we talked to students who were doing traineeships (stages) in the European Commission (EC), and I resolved on the spot that this was the logical and vitally essential next step for an aspiring Australian lawyer who wanted to practice EC law. So in October 1993, I arrived in Brussels for a five-month unpaid traineeship in the anti-dumping section of the Commission's Directorate-General for international trade.

To this day I'm convinced they only took me because I badgered them to death. In Brussels circles, the lobbying efforts required to land a stage position in the Commission are legendary. Today, a decade later, my paid job and my voluntary work with the Southern Cross Group often involve lobbying, and I smile when I

remember that I first learned how to lobby in the summer of 1993 when my traineeship position in Brussels was by no means assured. In Hamburg, my professor and some of his former students enlightened me as to what would be required, and put in a good word for me with various contacts. Taking the Australian approach, and simply applying and relying on the merits of a written application, is no way to land a European Commission stage. First I had to get onto the short list, also known as being in the 'Blue Book', and then I had to get someone in the Commission to pick me out of the Blue Book and give me a position. With Blue Book status achieved, difficult enough for a non-EU national, I was devastated to receive a rejection letter in late September. More desperate and persuasive phone calls from Hamburg to various Commission officials ensued.

To my amazement, finally a Scotsman in the Commission took pity on me and I was on my way. The fact that the position was unpaid and I had no savings meant that my long-suffering father had to go to his credit union in Canberra and take out a loan to support me during the training, which I later had to repay. In December 1993, half-way through the traineeship, and with no job prospects lined up in Europe, I turned down a lecturing position at the University of Adelaide Law School, because by then I knew that I wouldn't be ready to go home for quite some time.

After the Commission stage, I sent applications to just about every law firm in Brussels. The result was a job running the small Brussels outpost of a German law firm that was based in Freiburg in the Black Forest. It seems there is a niche market in Brussels for native English-speaking lawyers who have good German. Clueless and naive, I took on what was initially a one-year glorified trainee position, relying heavily on the only other person in the Brussels office, my secretary, to explain to me what I was supposed to be doing. My boss was rarely in Brussels. But the job, though scary and overwhelming at first, was a challenge and an incredibly thorough grounding in the Brussels Euro-scene, and I met many people during that period who remain good friends to this day.

The position in the Freiburg law firm became permanent, but after two years, I decided it was time to move to a larger law firm

to gain experience in bigger European law cases. So in early 1996 I went to work in the Brussels office of a much larger German law firm which was later swallowed up by one of the huge London 'magic circle' law firms. Those years were extremely busy and professionally rewarding, exciting, and challenging, involving a great deal of travel all over the world. But they were also, over time, exhausting. It took me several years to realise that I had to find a work-life balance, and that there are few, if any, rewards in sacrificing one's entire self to an employer.

For some time, I had had in the back of my mind a niggling desire to take the New York bar exam and to live in America. I decided to give it a shot in late 1999, when I was finally fed up with my job in Brussels to the extent that I was motivated to actually take steps to change my situation. I sent off email CVs to some of the trade law practices of law firms in Washington DC, and landed a job with a US firm. The firm applied for a US visa for me which took nine months to come through, but in the meantime, I worked out my four-month notice period in Brussels, then crossed the Atlantic to study for the New York bar exam in the summer of 2000.

If I had known how horrible taking the New York bar exam was going to be, I would never have entertained the dream of doing it for so many years. I spent a very unpleasant two months during the summer of 2000 in DC attending preparatory bar exam video lectures and living in a tiny student dormitory room on the campus of George Washington University. I felt ancient at 34, next to all the US law school graduates, mainly in their mid-twenties, and very isolated as a result. It was hard to knuckle down and study and I was petrified that my brain simply wasn't capable of remembering everything I had to remember when all my exams at ANU law school in Canberra had always been open book.

Two minutes after arriving in the US, I missed my life and friends in Brussels profoundly, despite the fact that walking away from my old job in Brussels was a huge relief to me and absolutely the right decision. I tried with difficulty to focus on studying for the bar exam, held over two days in Albany, NY in the last week of July. Although I think I put in a fair effort despite feelings of displacement,

circumstances ultimately conspired against me. On the night between the first and second days of the exam, I fractured a wisdom tooth and couldn't complete the test, instead having to rush off to a dentist to have the offending tooth extracted in emergency surgery in downtown Albany.

Two days later I flew back to Australia, via Brussels, feeling squashed and unhappy, for a pre-planned two-month holiday with my father while I waited for my US visa, knowing that I would have to re-take the exam the following February, and apprehensive that I was going to have to explain to my new employer that I would need time off to do so. But the long holiday caravanning around Australia with my father was the tonic I needed. Ultimately, I returned to DC to start my job in October 2000 and successfully passed the bar in February 2001.

America was not what I expected. Perhaps that's an unfair statement, because I had never properly thought about what I did expect before I went. The job opportunity was there and it seemed too good to pass up. I arrived in time for the Bush/Gore presidential election, and I was in DC—like the Australian Prime Minister John Howard—on September 11, 2001 when the Pentagon was hit by an aeroplane. It was a curious—even atypical time—to experience the US. Before I went, friends told me that being Australian, I'd have no trouble fitting in. But I had more culture shock in the US than I'd ever had in Germany or Belgium. Sometimes, although I was conversing with Americans in English, I really didn't have a clue what they were talking about. I made some friends, but it was difficult. Suddenly I was spending all my holidays back in Brussels.

By this time, a great deal of my spare time was being devoted to the Southern Cross Group. While in Brussels during the 1990s, I'd been a member of the Belgium committee for Australian Business in Europe (ABIE), essentially a networking organisation for Australians and those doing business with Australia, originally founded in London. Myself and another ABIE Belgium committee member felt that ABIE should be lobbying for change on various issues which negatively impacted Australians overseas. While there was support among our ABIE Belgium colleagues, ABIE UK felt that this was

outside ABIE's mandate. Eventually, we decided to form our own advocacy organisation for overseas Australians.

The Southern Cross Group (SCG) was 'born' at a meeting of Australians in Brussels, attended by about 35 individuals, in late January 2000. Several people came forward as our initial volunteer committee members. Later that year we established a website (www.southern-cross-group.org) and in an instant we were global.

Little did we realise at the time that the organisation would flourish and grow to the extent that it has. That fact in itself is proof that there is an enormous need for an international non-governmental organisation which has the special interests of overseas Australians at heart.

One particular issue quickly emerged during the SCG's formation as pressing for many hundreds of thousands of expat Australians everywhere, and soon we were coordinating a global and concerted effort to convince the Australian government to repeal Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948. The provision (which was finally repealed with effect from 4 April 2002) operated to automatically strip Australian citizens (whether born in Australia or naturalised) of their Australian citizenship when they took a second citizenship in adulthood. Essentially it impacted only on Australians overseas—people who had lived in another country long enough to qualify to become citizens of their host country. Many Australians took another citizenship without realising they would lose their Australian citizenship. Finding out that they were no longer Australian some time later when they went to renew their Australian passport was often a devastating and upsetting experience. Others held-off taking a new citizenship because they knew about Section 17 and couldn't bear to think they'd lose their Australian citizenship. Although Australia allowed dual citizenship for about five million citizens, primarily migrants and their children, expats were being discriminated against.

Even before the Southern Cross Group was founded in January 2000, we had contributed a short letter to the Australian Citizenship Council (ACC) in early 1999 when it began to review the Citizenship Act. We called for the repeal of Section 17, and the ACC also

recommended repeal to the Government in February 2000. Then we waited until May 2001 for the Government to respond to the ACC's recommendations, but when it did, it still wasn't sure whether Section 17 should be repealed or not. Finally, after over 800 individual submissions were received in just one month in mid 2001, in response to a further discussion paper, the Government announced it would repeal Section 17 in August 2001.

That's the short version: behind the scenes, we were madly writing letters to high profile expatriate Australians, and contacting as many other expat Australians as we could, often through existing expat organisations around the world and various websites, urging everyone to write to Canberra. Some nights I lay awake in bed and wondered who else we could possibly contact and what else we could possibly do to make the repeal of Section 17 a reality. Very few stones were left unturned.

Over the entire period several thousand letters, faxes and emails were received by politicians in Canberra from expats. This was unprecedented. It's very hard to get something changed when you aren't where the action is, and indeed, when many of the people negatively impacted no longer have a vote in Australia. But our voices were eventually too numerous to be ignored.

Most of the Section 17 campaign took place while I was in DC. After September 11, 2001, I decided that I really wanted to move back to Brussels, and interviewed successfully for jobs there in late 2001. I was back in Canberra waiting for my Belgian work permit to come through in February 2002 when the Bill to repeal Section 17 was introduced into the House of Representatives. My father and I were in the peanut gallery at Parliament House, with broad grins on our faces. He had been at the SCG's founding meeting in Brussels, and continues to be an active volunteer for the Group, as well as a huge support for his daughter.

Some people might have thought that the SCG was just about Section 17 and dual citizenship, and that we would collapse in a heap once it was repealed. In fact, it was the catalyst of something far more important—the Australian diaspora movement—which I believe will prove in the longer term to be vital for Australia as it goes forward

in a globalised world. We started using the term ‘Australian diaspora’ several years ago, and now it regularly appears in the media and elsewhere. It denotes the some 860,000 Australians who live overseas, and probably also includes others who are not Australians but who have close family or historical links to the country. We can say that the Australian diaspora today is at least one million people. That’s a figure equal to about five percent of Australia’s resident population.

We in the diaspora all have one thing in common—Australia. We didn’t stop feeling Australian just because we moved overseas. If anything, many expats tell the SCG that they feel more Australian outside Australia than when they are at home. A whole army of unofficial ambassadors roams the world on Australia’s behalf and is Australia’s home-grown global network. This should allow Australia to be somewhere that can be tapped in to from anywhere.

But many expats are bitterly disappointed how Australians at home, and Australian governments, treat them—perhaps subconsciously—as traitors for having left. At the very least, it’s usually ‘out of sight, out of mind’. The tall poppy syndrome may play a role, which we will never be able to properly measure. Expats are also punished—inadvertently perhaps—by the failure of Australian governments to properly consider the impact of laws and policies—or in some cases, the lack thereof—on Australians living abroad. Some of this may simply be because our voices have never been heard in any organised fashion before. If something’s broken and you don’t phone the repairman, he’s not going to appear magically of his own accord.

Many other countries have policies and structures in place to include their overseas nationals in the life of their countries, and to harness the huge resource that their diasporas represent. Australia lags sadly behind on this front.

It is my fervent hope—shared by the other volunteers whom I work alongside at the Southern Cross Group—that there’ll be a time, perhaps a decade or two from now, when it’s simply part of our culture, a given for all Australians at home, that Australia is the sum of its entire people. Although a significant proportion of Australians do not reside within its territorial boundaries, that should not result

in their exclusion from the life of the country and is just a natural corollary of globalisation. The Southern Cross Group will continue to chip away, in small ways and on a number of fronts, to eventually achieve this paradigm shift.

When Australians go overseas today, like their Digger countrymen before them, every single one of them embarks on their own adventure. In this book, we've only got space to share a handful of personal journeys. But all adventures lead to growth and change, strengthening our adaptability, perseverance and determination as a nation. We're a thousand times more pampered than those First World War heroes—no trench foot or Bully beef today. And I bet the Anzacs never had 'Filet Kangourou' jump out at them from a Belgian restaurant menu.

But one thing hasn't changed since the Great War. It doesn't matter when or whether the adventure ultimately leads back to Australia's shores, because wherever we are, Australia remains part of us and we remain part of it.



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