

Michael Fullilove

From foreign poppy syndrome to axis of ocker

The news that our most famous expatriate, Rupert Murdoch, is moving News Corporation's headquarters to the United States has prompted new mutterings about the old issue of expatriates and their commitment to this country.

If you were to judge from the noise generated by commentators and talkback callers on this question, Australians don't like their expatriates one bit. Every now and again, prominent expatriates will poke their heads above the parapet and promptly have them shot off.

Several months ago, Germaine Greer's admittedly banal article about Australian culture generated scores of letters to the editor and general outrage. The Prime Minister joined the shooting party, describing her remarks as "patronising" and "elitist" and concluding: "If she wants to stay in another country, then good luck to her."

Murdoch and Greer are only two such culprits, however. In 2000, a feeding frenzy occurred around the broken body of international art critic Robert Hughes. Any adverse attention he might have received for his BBC documentary on Australia and his comments during a Western Australian court case was compounded by his sin of residing overseas. One commentator told us that "loudmouth expatriates" should "learn to listen to what those who live in this country have to say". Another complained of "expatriatitus". A third wrote that Hughes's peers "have spent so much of their lives elsewhere that maybe we should stop calling them 'expatriates' and just see them as ignorant foreigners."

Other expatriates have received similar criticisms in recent times, raising the question of whether we are seeing a significant shift in Australian attitudes. Has the cultural pendulum, stuck for so long in the position of excessive regard for the opinion of outsiders, now swung the other way? Does a foreign postcode disqualify an Australian from commenting on national affairs, and cause resentment in those of us who have been left behind? Are we in the grip of a new and more virulent strain of the tall poppy syndrome, our traditional suspicion of high-flyers and big-noters? Are we suffering from "foreign poppy syndrome"?

The answer is no. As part of a study of the policy implications of the Australian diaspora, the Lowy Institute for International Policy commissioned UMR Research to conduct a telephone survey of Australians' attitudes to their expatriates.

The results are striking. It turns out Australians are far more sanguine than we might have expected about their non-resident countrymen and women: 91 per cent of the 1000 respondents agreed with the positive statement that expatriates are "adventurous people prepared to try their luck and have a go overseas", and only 6 per cent disagreed. Most respondents also believed that expatriates are successful: 75 per cent agreed they "are doing well for themselves away from home", and only 6 per cent disagreed.

By contrast, only 10 per cent of respondents believed expatriates "have let us down by leaving Australia", and a massive 86 per cent disagreed. On the issue of long-distance lectures, only 14 per cent of people agreed that expatriates "too often delight in running Australia down from offshore", and 71 per cent disagreed with the statement. Far from sniping at expatriates, then, most of us support them.

There is a second insight from the survey: the existence of a generational shift, whereby younger people are more positively inclined towards expatriates than older people are. For example, we asked about Australians who "have been overseas for many years and have no plans to return home". Sixty-two per cent of all respondents identified these people as "real" Australians, 31 per

cent did not. However, the responses varied substantially depending on age: whereas 73 per cent of respondents under the age of 30 said they thought of these long-term expatriates as “real” Australians, only 38 per cent of respondents over the age of 65 agreed.

These are significant results, and they indicate the community may have a better grasp of the realities of globalisation than do some of our opinion leaders. To focus on the Greers of this world is to miss the real story about Australian expatriates – and it’s a good story.

Australia’s diaspora is big – nearly 1 million strong. To put it another way, there are nearly as many Australians living offshore as there are in Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT put together. It’s no surprise that Australians are positive about the diaspora – almost all of us know someone who’s a member of it.

The community is geographically diverse: while many Australians still cluster in the United Kingdom, there are significant numbers in Europe, North America and Asia. Our expatriates are relatively young, which helps explain the generational shift in the polling results. They are also relatively prosperous and highly employable. Many are located in interesting and influential positions – so much so that one particular international official refers to “the axis of ocker”.

In contrast to Greer’s era, the diaspora is dynamic – rather than turning their backs on Australia once and for all, expatriates these days are more likely to move back and forward between Australia and other countries as opportunities present. Importantly, expatriates are overwhelmingly well-disposed to Australia and keen to help. They live somewhere else, but they remain engaged in Australia’s national life.

Australia’s offshore citizens represent a valuable resource: a market, a sales force, an ambassadorial corps and a constituency. Most Australians understand this. The hope is that our opinion leaders and policymakers will catch on soon, and craft some modest but intelligent policies to encourage Australian institutions to harness this great national asset.

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