

Why are so many Kiwis fleeing to Australia?



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Recent statistics show a marked upsurge in the number of New Zealanders moving to Australia. Well, hello, as they say. Notwithstanding all its problems (thoroughly documented in these pages), Australia still exerts a powerful attraction to citizens of its smaller neighbour — a country that feels as if it has completely lost its way.

My wife and I, New Zealanders both, recently spent several weeks on the Australian side of the Ditch and not for the first time found ourselves thinking: 'We could live here.' It would take very little to turn that 'could' into 'should'.

Plenty of family members and old friends have preceded us, including one of our sons.

In Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane we also spent time with a brother-in-law, two nephews, a niece and several former New Zealand colleagues. They enjoy a considerably higher standard of living in Australia, are contentedly settled and have no thought of ever returning. Some who monitor events in New Zealand shake their heads in despair and bewilderment and ask what the hell has happened to their home country.

The New Zealand diaspora in Australia bears comparison with the mass emigration of the Irish in the 19th century. Unlike the Irish, those quitting New Zealand didn't face starvation and oppression, but they decided their prospects were markedly better across the Tasman and made the hard decision to leave friends and loved ones behind. And as is borne out by the history of virtually all countries built on migration, the people who uproot themselves and leave for a new land typically include the most talented, energetic and ambitious - in other words, people New Zealand can ill afford to lose.

My wife and I spent time in all three major cities on Australia's eastern seaboard and were struck by the general impression of prosperity and optimism. It stood in stark contrast to our polarised, anxious, demoralised and bitchy home country.

Admittedly Melbourne, where we once lived, felt less vibrant than when we were last there seven years ago. Areas of the Victorian capital that were once full of life - Carlton's Lygon Street, for example - seemed tired and unloved, perhaps due to the lingering impact of stringencies needlessly inflicted by the authoritarian Daniel Andrews regime during Covid.

Sydney and Brisbane, on the other hand, were buzzing. I can't visit the latter city these days without recalling that when I worked in Melbourne in the early-1970s, my fellow journalists sneeringly referred to Queensland as the Deep North - a dig at the state's redneck image under Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. No one strolling around the magnificent parklands of South Bank or admiring the city's audacious high-rise architecture would think of applying that epithet now.

Queensland is a magnet to Kiwis. In one of those two-degrees-of-separation moments that New Zealanders joke about, I struck up a conversation with a Queensland Rail attendant on the platform at Brisbane's Roma Street Station and learned she had attended the same tiny rural New Zealand primary school as one of my nephews.

So many Kiwis have made the move across the Tasman that it came as a surprise to learn recently that New Zealanders make up only 2.3 per cent of Australia's population.

There are 618,000 of us there - slightly fewer than those from Britain, India and China. But that's still roughly the population of Christchurch and Wellington combined.

There will be more; you can count on that.

Not only has New Zealand's inflow of non-New Zealand citizens slumped in the past year from 96,600 to 58,500, but migration departures reached a record high of 73,900.

More than half of those leaving went to Australia, enabling opposition leader Chris Hipkins to taunt the centre-right coalition government with the damning statistic that

200 Kiwis are flying out every day.

They are abandoning a country that has lost its mojo. A stubborn cost-of-living crisis is the latest downer, but it comes after years of inertia, national self-doubt and sullen despondency.

The 2023 election result, which decisively ousted a floundering and discredited Labour government, lifted the national mood only temporarily. Now Labour is gaining momentum in the polls again, despite having the same lacklustre party leadership that the country voted out two years ago.

Even the country's corporate bosses seem to have lost faith in the supposedly business-friendly government. In the New Zealand Herald's annual Mood of the Boardroom survey, CEOs ranked Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Minister of Finance Nicola Willis as 15th and 13th respectively among cabinet ministers for their performance - hardly a resounding vote of confidence.

Where did it all go wrong? A weak economy may be the immediate issue driving New Zealanders away, but the country's descent into its slough of despond can be traced back to the term of the second Jacinda Ardern-led government in 2020 to 2023.

That's when popular support for Ardern's leadership during the Covid pandemic started to unravel and her 'Be Kind' rubric strangely transmogrified into ugly authoritarianism.

It was also the period when Labour, having been freed from the shackles of its conservative coalition partner, the New Zealand First party, began pushing a radical and underhand programme of change that included co-governance with unelected Maori tribal interests over precious resources including water.

Those three years now resemble a bad dream in which a toxic amalgam of aggressive Maori ethno-nationalism, virulent transgender activism and attacks on free speech - all endorsed by Labour and its Green party enablers - placed unprecedented strain on the broad consensus that has traditionally underpinned New Zealand public policy. It didn't help that the news media - previously a 'broad church', agnostic in its news coverage and open to a wide range of opinion - jettisoned its commitment to editorial balance, along with its credibility, by functioning as uncritical cheerleaders for the radical left. That had the effect of further undermining social cohesion by driving people to highly partisan news and opinion platforms where rage and resentment flourish.

Covid continues to cast a long shadow in New Zealand, both economically and socially. As well as causing lingering damage to business, especially in the hospitality and retail sectors, it exposed social fissures that have been slow to heal. Race relations are another running sore, with acrimony being stoked by extremists on both sides.

The result is that New Zealand today feels like a very different country from the one that existed ten years ago. It feels broken, fractious, fragmented and unsure of itself.

Some of the more extreme initiatives of the previous government have been undone, but still the country feels rudderless. In other words, no one should expect the Kiwi diaspora - a diaspora of the disenchanted and disillusioned - to abate anytime soon.

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