

# **Reflections on Australia**

**By Dave Cary**

[Editor's Note: Dave Cary retired as Professor of Sociology at Mary Baldwin College in December 2000. He is remembered not only for his work as a superb teacher and mentor to many generations of students, but also for his special devotion to our many foreign (mainly Japanese) students. During the last decade of his career he developed a special fondness for Australia, New Zealand and Japan and started a special connection between MBC and Australia-NZ including annual forays with large groups of students. When I and two other MBC faculty took students to Sydney in May 2003 we found Dave and his wife Nancy happily settled there waiting to host us.

Since arriving in Australia over a year ago, Dave has sent out bi-monthly letters describing Australian life. I have selected a few of his musings at random and am publishing them here because of Dave's insightful views on contemporary Australian life. I have deliberately kept his informal journal-style of writing]

## **Isolation in Oz**

Just how isolated from the rest of the civilized are the Aussies? Last night on the Australian version of Who Wants to be a Millionaire?, a question at the \$2,000.00 level was as follows "The American athlete O.J. Simpson played was a star in what sport? The options were A) badminton, B) tennis, C) Gridiron (the Aussie name for our football) or D) baseball. The contestant had no idea and consulted the audience. Only 54% rightly chose C. He was so uncertain of their guess that he then chose his expert, who did choose C. How can it be that some 46% of an audience anywhere in the world cannot identify the sport played by O.J.? How were they able to escape the hundreds of hours of coverage on TV and the near endless newsprint given over to his trial? Did they not have CNN and CNBC and Court TV and all the other quality programming we are able to get in the states? It leads me to wonder if they could identify Monica Lewinsky. I just instinctively like anyone who doesn't know such people. Australia looks better all the time.

And Sydney is, without any question, the best place we have ever lived. I have detailed the numerous reasons why I can say that, but you should also hear about a few problems that do exist. Engineers Australia publishes an annual report on the city and surrounding area in which they grade various aspect of it infrastructure. Let's start with the sewage system.

The report reads "We have an ancient and crumbling sewage system. It could collapse at any time and leave us literally knee deep for weeks." A grade of D. The rush of storm water into the sewage system during heavy rains has meant that over the past year some beaches posted warnings. These advised not swimming during and at least three days after heavy rain, and for 12 months in 2002-2003 that would have meant not swimming for nearly a third of the year.

Even without the excess flow from storms the wastewater treatment system rated a grade of C-, as did the potable water supply outside the metropolitan area. Local roads were also scored C-. The rail service has seen a number of crashes in the last twelve months. These along with problems in bridge safety, engine driver training, and operating problems got the system a D. The worst crash, one that took six lives, appears to have been caused in part because the "dead man" system that should bring the train to a halt if the driver dies, didn't. Either the dead driver's weight meant his dead foot was enough to keep the power on, or he had used a wedged in stick to keep the peddle in operation while he took his foot off. It turns out all drivers know this trick.

State roads and national roads got scores of C+. Potable water in the metropolitan area got a B-. And, electricity supply got the highest grade, a B. But there is talk that will go down in a couple of years as there is not enough new capacity due to come on line.

As you can see, it looks bad. But do I care? No, that is their problem. We are just sojourners. And the problems with Metro and traffic in Washington DC are the problems of you who live there. How great, none of it is my responsibility.

## **Death Penalty**

The death penalty, which no longer exists in Australia, is in the news. This is concomitant with the first sentencing in the Bali bombing cases. John Howard, the Prime Minister, has suggested that reintroducing capital punishment should be discussed in the legislature. I must say he seems to have an uncanny political grasp on when to say what. When people are most vengeful, he talks vengeance. The relatives and friends of victims have

responded in anything but one supporting voice. From the letters in the newspaper I would guess that more than half of this group sees the penalty given by the Indonesian court as an insult to the memory of their loved ones. The fact that the bomb in Jakarta came a day or so after talk of the death penalty was initiated should, you would think, have negated anyone continuing to use the deterrent argument, but not so. I really know little about Indonesian prisons, but what I have read would lead me to believe that a long sentence therein would be a good deal worse than death.

### **Supermarket Shenanigans**

At the neighborhood level some of my most interesting encounters continue to occur at the supermarket. Last week a regular (man of about 70 standing something like 5 ft) stopped me in the bread section to show me that a loaf of the expensive bread was in with the “on sale” bread. He wanted me to be a witness so that he could take the expensive loaf and argue he should get it for the price of the cheaper dough. Didn’t I agree that was what should happen? But he said, just you watch, they will scan it and say I have to pay the higher price. He said he would refuse to do that.

Just to keep him going, I asked him what he would do if they said the price was even less than what was given for the cheap loaf, would he insist on paying the price shown at the cheap bread display. That threw him. When he finally understood what I was getting at, he said hell no, he would pay the price they stated since it was a big company out to screw the consumer and too bad if they made a mistake. I followed him to the cashier to witness the outcome. On being challenged the cashier called the manager who went and got a loaf of the cheap bread, brought it back, and told the guy to take his pick and pay the price that came up. He took the cheap loaf. Damn, I like his spirit. It is only when you are retired and have time to waste that you can really be involved in such interactions.

### **Maroubra to La Perouse Pt. At Botany Bay**

First, a small review of your Australian history. Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay in 1770. His major mission was to discover and claim the suspected southern lands for England. He “discovered” and mapped pretty much all of the east coast of what became known as

Australia. It was hardly the “empty land” or *Terra Nullis* it was thought to be as the Aboriginal people had been there for something like 50,000 years and are estimated to have numbered around 300,000. In 1786, after the Revolutionary War in America, it was recommended that Botany Bay be used as a penal colony. Georgia was no longer a possibility. (If only Virginia’s modern day penal authorities had been around they no doubt would have taken in and charged England for every convict it wanted to send as a way to balance the state budget. Virginia’s Department of Corrections in the 1980s greatly over estimated the number of cells needed and then built to those screwy estimates.)

The first fleet carrying 548 male and 188 female convicts arrived in 1788. Captain Arthur Phillip, later to be governor, quickly realized that Botany Bay was not suitable as there was little fresh water. A bit further north the fleet discovered what Phillip named Port Jackson and what we know as Sydney Harbour. The words in Capt. Phillip’s report are often quoted “one of the finest harbours in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line might ride in perfect security.” It is big and it is deep. It was there the first penal colony was established.

That out of the way, let me launch in to a tale of the hike Nancy and I took on Sunday. Using a recently purchased book titled *Exploring the Sydney Region*, we set off to do the trek from Maroubra Beach to La Perouse on Botany Bay. Sydney has eastern beaches and northern beaches though they are of course all on the east coast. Maroubra is one of the beaches in eastern Sydney. Those would more logically be known as the southern beaches since they are south of the harbour entrance and where else would they be but on the east if they are in Sydney. The beaches north of the harbour entrance are appropriately called the northern beaches. You might also wonder why the famous Alligator River in the Northern Territory is not called the Crocodile River since there are no alligators in Australia.

The order of beaches heading south from the harbour is Bondi, Tamarama, Bronte, Coogee, and then Maroubra. That is about it for beaches on the way to Botany Bay except for Little Beach which certainly is. The beaches are separated from each other by dramatic sand stone headlands. Thus, if you look right or left from any of them, you see a point of land and waves breaking against the cliffs. We have several times done the Bondi to Coogee beach and cliff walk which is deserves its popularity. A problem on weekends though is that popularity. Maroubra to La Perouse is not popular. In the approximately 12 kilometers we walked, the only

time we saw others was while sharing space on the fairways of two golf courses and walking through a third.

As we left the apartment we felt a bit of rain so returned to get rain jackets and an umbrella. By the time we reached the bus stop a few blocks away the sun was blazing and kept at it all day. We lugged the jackets and the umbrellas the rest of the day.

There was a good bit of variety on the walk. After all, it was within the boundaries of the city. In addition to the beautiful beach and the extended sections along the deserted cliffs, the walk borders the Anzac Rifle Range, traverses the Randwick and the Coast Golf Courses, includes a stretch on a paved road next to a sewage plant, goes along side the old and no longer used Coast Hospital (originally for lepers) and cemetery, cuts through the St. Michaels Golf Course, through Botany Bay National Park, and ends at La Perouse Pt. The temperature reached 29 degrees, and if not for a stop at a refreshment stand at Little Beach for a couple of smoothies, we would have been even drier than we were at the end: Dry on the inside, but soaked with sweat.

It really was a fascinating walk but not because of the flora, which did not vary a great deal, mainly banksia bushes, or because of the wildlife which consisted solely of lizards and sea birds. Still, a look to the left and down often gave a view of big waves breaking onto the cliffs. It has perhaps some of the beauty I associate with pictures of the California Coast at Big Sur. Most memorable though were the golf courses, (though the constant sound of guns being fired in the area of the rifle range also kept our interest).

Past the water treatment/sewage plant we turned out of Long Bay, and it looked as though there was no option except to walk on the cliff edge of the Randwick Golf Course. A briefly considered option was to walk down along the water's edge on rocks. A glance in that direction put the quash on that idea. We walked up to the first tee where two foursomes were waiting, and I decided it might be best to go ask at the pro-shop. The shop was so crowded with golfers that there was little chance of my ever getting to the counter. I asked one of the waiting golfers if he knew of the path of the trek and where it went from where we stood. With that typical friendly Aussie smile he told us, "right down the fairways, but you might want to stay to the left". Off we went again to the first tee where one of the waiting golfers told us "you're all right, just go ahead on the left side, though you would be safer in the middle of the fairway given our games."

So off we went, and followed the cliff top alongside five fairways of a beautiful links course. Not a golfer expressed any surprise that we were there, and the general response was a smile and "G'day." What a setting!

Now the Randwick Golf Course was clearly low key. No one was riding, though many a golfer had a number of years on me. At the next, the Coast Golf Club, things just looked different. The clubhouse was a beauty, and the cars in the parking lot spoke of money. It just did not seem right to go walking along those crowded fairways. But what else to do? This time I went in the clubhouse and asked at the bar. A bar that looks out over the cliffs and the Tasman Sea and makes you wonder why anyone even gets their clubs out of the car. The bar tender immediately came out from behind the bar (at first I thought he might throw me out) and with that typical Aussie smile led me to a lobby area where there was a map of the course and surrounding area. He showed me where we could walk the edge of the course, that area was all public land, but we could also take a road around it. I swear, the pleasantness of people over here just never fails to impress. Would you not be risking your life if you tried to walk most courses in the US?

We made it the rest of the way, got a sandwich at Perouse Pt, and then caught a bus back to Moore Park. (La Perouse was a French navy captain who landed at Botany Bay six days after the first fleet.)

It is, I think, interesting that now it is Botany Bay that is most heavily used by the big ships and one of the airports runways extends a bit into the Bay. Sydney Harbour is a place where ferries and sailboats ride. Which brings to mind that the date for the start of the Sydney to Hobart race is next week on Boxing Day. Fatal Storm, the story of the tragic 1998 race is a very good read.

## **The Bush**

We had a good soaking rain last night and it continues this morning. What a blessing for the firefighters and those who own homes situated in the bush.

The term "bush" is used to refer to everything from some backyards to the great dry center of the country and a lot in between. As Sydney has expanded, more and more people have come to live in houses that are surrounded by trees, bushes and natural grasses. It is, I should

think, a wonderful place to live, with beautiful parrots, marsupials about, and the wonderful smell of the eucalyptus.

However, as those who have camped in the bush know, most every bit of the flora is highly flammable in dry weather. Tour guides can stop nearly anywhere along the road to pick up dead fall from the trees that will serve as kindling and fuel for the cooking fire that evening. Thus, if you live in the bush around Sydney where there has been no significant rain for months, and the temperature has not uncommonly reached 35 degrees Celsius and higher, while the humidity is around 10%, and winds reach 100 km/h, you are unlikely to have been sleeping soundly during the past six days. Some forty-three homes have been destroyed.

That there have not been more is due to the heroic effort of firemen (full time and volunteers, men and women) and many homeowners and their neighbors. The firefighters have worked long days and nights trying to contain blazes that have come up into yards. The homeowners and neighbors help by keeping the garden hoses trained on the roofs and the grass of the yards. A number of helicopter water bombers have been brought in (one model of which costs AU\$12,000.00/hr to operate). Footage on TV has shown firefighters just yards from infernos created by the conditions and the shape of the land. Many homes sit on the edge of canyons and ravines, and the slopes work very well as chimneys. Several times they have shown situations where those manning the hoses have had to drop them and run like hell to get away from the flames. The fires move so very fast.

The print media tries to capture and relate what happens in the fires through the use of heroic language. The fire has been described as a wild beast that might or might not be controlled through superhuman efforts by the few on the lines. Some articles read as dispatches from the frontline of a WW I battle. And out of this rightfully come heroes. How the firefighters themselves see it can be much more prosaic. As one of the hundreds who came from across the country to help the NSW crews put it when asked why he had come so far “they are my mates”.

### **Crime in Australia**

There was an attempted robbery the other evening of the convenience store that is part of the apartment complex. I found this out when I went to get the morning paper the day after it happened. The 50% owner of the store who seems to work about 100 hours a week told me it had happened the previous night around 10:00 PM. He, surprise, wasn't working, but two

younger relatives were. They are all from Palestine, and it is often hard for me to understand their accent -- which is a strange hybrid. What I did get was that one of the employees was in the hospital.

The next day the other who was there at the time of the crime was working and I asked him what happened. He said this big guy had come running into the store and tried to rob them. I asked him if the guy had a weapon. He said yes, a rock. That is right, a rock! What a country. Anyhow, he hit the one clerk with the rock then grabbed the cash register and tried to haul it away but couldn't get it loose from the counter. He then ran out.

A rock! I was reminded of a interchange between one of my students and an inmate at the prison in Staunton, Virginia. I had taken the class on an evening to talk with inmates. We were in small groups, each with and inmate or two and about six students. In the group I chose to sit with was an inmate who really looked like a convict should look. He could have walked out of a James Cagney film. He could also have been a model for the Italian criminologist Ceasar Lombroso. This guy was an archetype: a mesomorph with tattoos.

One of my fearless students (such were not usually the brightest) started off by asking him why he was in prison. He told us it was for armed robbery. She asked him "how do you commit an armed robbery." He simply could not understand the question since for him it was like asking how do you drink water. She had to ask him several times before he realized she really did not know.

His answer was something like, "you get a gun, preferably a big gun (his gestures made it clear he meant a big handgun), you walk into the place you want to rob, you go up to the person at the cash register, you put the gun up to his or her head, and you say 'give me the money'". The same student then immediately asked, "what if they wont give you the money?" He said without hesitation "they will give you the money!" She continued with "just suppose they wont give you the money, then what?" Without any change in expression or tone he said, "you shoot them!"

Now, imagine a class in Australia being part of the same sort of interaction. The inmates first answer is "You get a rock". Such would not do much for your reputation at Rykers Island. Wow, what a big difference. Of course there are guns here and crimes with guns, but such are not so common.