



Paul and Cate Roberts

ANTHONY MACE

# BETTER BE HOME SOON

Close to 17,000 New Zealanders living in Australia packed their bags in the past year and came home. Ricky French asks what's driving the Kiwi exodus from the Lucky Country.

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**T**he 39th floor of Melbourne's Eureka Tower is not even halfway up. From the window of their rented apartment in the 300m-tall skyscraper, Paul and Cate Roberts look out across a city with a population the same as New Zealand's.

The apartment is a mess of cartons and boxes. The Kiwi couple are packing up 16 years of hard work and big-city living, earning good money, strolling out their front door and being among the shopping, nightlife and arts of what is routinely ranked one of the world's most liveable cities.

Paul, 59, gazes out the window, across the Yarra River to Flinders St. "We're going to miss all of this terribly," Cate, 62, nods. "Melbourne is just the most

unbelievable city," she says. "There's always something happening."

Something is happening all right. New Zealanders are going home. In the year ending June 2016, 25,703 people moved from Australia to New Zealand – a 6.8 per cent increase on the year before – while just 23,770 left New Zealand to settle in Australia, a net gain to New Zealand of 1933. When you consider that the highest number on record for New Zealanders moving to Australia – 53,800 – was only four years ago, the turnaround seems sudden and staggering.

The John Key government has been quick to champion its fiscal policy for luring Kiwis home. In fact, National's dream economic run has been more about domestic activity than export-led success – especially after dairy prices plummeted in 2014. But since Australia's mining boom collapsed, New Zealand has begun to look more alluring.

Chinese-led demand for Australia's iron ore fuelled rapid economic expansion in the mineral-rich states of Western Australia and Queensland during the boom, which peaked in 2012 – the same year most New Zealanders made the move across the ditch. The figures today tell a vastly different story, with WA and Queensland now shedding investment, jobs and people. Many of those people are Kiwis.

Professor Paul Spoonley, of Massey University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, says the job market is the major factor that influences where New Zealanders decide to live. "During the global financial crisis, there was a very significant move from New Zealand to Australia. But since the end of the GFC, the New Zealand labour market has been strong. There are very significant skills shortages in New Zealand at the moment, and more than half of that jobs growth has occurred in Auckland."

For Paul and Cate Roberts, their decision to trade apartment living in Melbourne for an eco-home in Matakana was more nuanced. "The economy wasn't really a factor in deciding to move back," says Cate. "It was more cultural and family-related." Paul says the realisation a move was on the cards came after a night out in Auckland in 2010.



GLENN JEFFREY

Returning Kiwi Phil Smiley with Australian-born daughters Jean (left) and Sadie, on the deck of their New Plymouth home: "It's about figuring out the lifestyle you can afford."

"We were at the Occidental Belgian Bar, and it was so friendly, the interaction between the people. It was the laid-back aspect of Kiwi culture. It just hit us, how much we missed it. We thought, 'We've got to do this.'"

The couple bought an apartment in Auckland but continued to live in Melbourne, where they sold their home and started renting at the Eureka Tower. Cate, a director of human resources, says she earns more in Australia than she ever could in New Zealand, but planning for retirement influenced their

decision to go home. "We've been apartment dwellers for 25 years and that's really suited our lifestyle. But without that same income [after retiring], that would be hard."

Paul says they'd been following the rise in Auckland house prices and thought, "What would happen if someone offered us a silly price for the apartment?" "So we came up with what we thought was a silly price and it sold straight away."

They've now been able to buy a property for their daughter, in Kaingaroa



GLENN JEFFREY

With home ownership out of reach in Melbourne, Phil and Ange Smiley sold their cafe and moved to New Plymouth. Phil is now general manager and a shareholder at cafe-restaurant Monica's Eatery.

in the Far North, as well as build their Matakana eco-house. "We can have a comfortable retirement," says Cate. "Not lavish, but comfortable."

**F**or some Kiwis with young families, Australian cities have simply become unaffordable. Speaking from his house in the New Plymouth suburb of Westown, 36-year-old father of two Phil Smiley says the decision to move home nearly two years ago wasn't based on a burning desire to live in New Zealand but to escape an impossible situation in Melbourne.

After marrying an Australian and owning and running a successful cafe in the northern suburb of Preston, Smiley felt the family was beginning to tread water. "We were planning on having our second baby, and wanted to sell the cafe. But mostly we wanted to own a house, and the chance of doing that was pretty slim in Melbourne."

Smiley says the average house price around Preston, 10km from the CBD, was about \$800,000. "We didn't want to move to the outer suburbs because everything we loved about Melbourne was in the inner city. So we brainstormed all the things we wanted and New Plymouth ticked all the boxes."

With wife Ange, 35, and children Jean, seven, and Sadie, two, they bought the house in New Plymouth and moved there in December 2014. "It's a

quarter-acre block, solid-as 1950s house, five minutes from the beach. And it was under \$300,000. My parents are here and they're a great support. New Plymouth has really changed over the past few years. Domestic tourism is becoming a big thing."

Smiley is now general manager and a minor shareholder of Monica's Eatery, a cafe-restaurant next to the new Len Lye Centre, one of the city's cultural hubs. "It's about figuring out the lifestyle you can afford," he says. "To be honest, I didn't take any notice politically of John Key or his policies. We just wanted that little plot of land we could turn into our home, where we could grow vegetables and build a treehouse for the kids."

**I**nequitable residency rules for New Zealanders living in Australia is still a festering sore point, with many Kiwis citing shoddy treatment by the Australian federal government as a reason for moving home.

The Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, introduced in 1973, allows New Zealand and Australian citizens to live, work and travel freely between the two countries. But changes made by John Howard's Liberal-National coalition in 2001, mean New Zealanders who arrived after February 26, 2001 must hold a permanent resident visa or have Australian citizenship to apply for the full range of

social security benefits, student loans and the right to vote. Since 1994, New Zealanders migrating to Australia have entered under a special category visa (SCV) and gaining a permanent resident visa – the first step towards Australian citizenship – is difficult, even for Kiwis well established in Australia, as Anne and David Crozier were to find out.

The Croziers, both 46, moved from Auckland to Brisbane in 2006 with their two children, Emily, now 14, and Amy, 12. Anne says the information they were given by Australian immigration officials at the time was wildly inaccurate. "We were told on three separate occasions we wouldn't have to do anything, that we'd be treated exactly like Australians."

Anne gave birth to their third child, James, in Brisbane, and it was when she went to register his birth that she discovered their situation wasn't what she assumed it was. "I found out that James wouldn't be an Australian citizen for 10 years, even though he was born there. He would have to get a New Zealand passport to travel. We also found out we didn't have permanent residency status, even though we were permanent residents."

It took years of trawling through paperwork and bureaucracy to get their Australian citizenship, says Anne. "An organisation called OzKiwi alerted us to something we hadn't heard of – a resident return visa. Any New Zealander who travelled to Australia prior to September 1994 could be granted this visa."

The Croziers followed this pathway through various twists and turns and the visa was eventually granted. Two years later, they were able to apply for citizenship. A different process entirely was required for the children, whose applications alone cost \$6500. Then for the punchline. "David came home one day and said he'd been offered a job in New Zealand. We were leaving..."

The family are now happily renting in Whangaparaoa. "It's beautiful," says Anne. "It's got all the services we need, good schools, good transport. David gets the ferry from Gulf Harbour to the city every morning and he just loves it."

She says the hoops they had to jump through to get Australian citizenship made them feel they weren't wanted. "You pay all those taxes and build up this awareness in your mind... you feel like

you're part of it, but you're not, really."

New Zealander Stan Holland agrees. "I came to Sydney in 2002 for work," he says. "I'm an IT consultant and earn a high income. I pay my tax and own my home. I went to an election party this year and people were asking me who I voted for and I had to tell them I'm not allowed to vote. They couldn't believe it, after all the time I'd been here. I feel like a second-class citizen."

But he's not second-class, of course, because he's not a citizen at all. And now Holland is selling up and moving to Nelson, taking his successful IT business with him.

"To be honest, it looks like the country [Australia] is going down the gurgler. And I'm feeling even more disconnected because I have to sit on the sidelines and watch," he says. "It feels like we're welcomed here, but only as a cash cow. I laugh when I think of how much money I've paid in taxes in Australia over the years. When [then-prime minister] Kevin Rudd gave out \$1000 to everyone during the GFC to stimulate the economy, guess who didn't get it?"

**I**n February this year, after negotiations between John Key and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the Australian government announced changes to the residency rules for Kiwis, introducing a new pathway to Australian citizenship under the country's General Skilled Migration Programme.

Under the proposed changes, New Zealanders who arrived in Australia after February 26, 2001, but before the new announcement on February 19 this year, and who have lived in Australia for more than five years, earning at least \$53,000 every year, will be able to apply for permanent residency. The new pathway is set to kick in next July, and it's estimated 60,000-70,000 New Zealanders living in Australia will be eligible.

According to Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne, a migration expert at the University of Melbourne, the inequitable residency rules are due to historically uneven migration flows.

"Overwhelmingly, the flow favours Australia getting New Zealanders, and there was a concern about the burden on the social welfare from New Zealanders who were not working when they



NICOLA EDMONDS

Australian engineer Ben Mosley was offered a job in Wellington after mining contract work dried up in Brisbane. He took it. "I really enjoy the New Zealand lifestyle."

came here. It's a dilemma from Australia's perspective. If the flows were equal, I don't think there would be any concerns at all about welfare access."

Hawthorne says the fluidity of movement under the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement has allowed Kiwis to go wherever the jobs are. "Because the economy in New Zealand had a buoyant period and the economy in Australia was coming to the end of the mining boom, we saw a key driver for New Zealanders returning home." Now the flows are more equal, she isn't

"Business peaked around 2012, but then really dropped off. There are lots of small towns in rural Australia that have almost disappeared."

BEN MOSLEY



GETTY

The Mt Whaleback iron ore mine in Western Australia's Pilbara region. It's the biggest single-pit, open-cut iron ore mine in the world – but not big enough to save the loss of thousands of jobs after the collapse of Australia's mining boom.

surprised to see the recent easing in the harsh residency rules for New Zealanders living in Australia.

The numbers of Australians moving here is also on the rise, although not quite at the rate some people believe. According to Richard Bedford, Professor of Population Geography at Auckland University of Technology, of the 25,703 people who emigrated from Australia in the year ending June, almost 17,000 were New Zealanders returning home. "But it's still the largest net gain of Australian citizens we've had for a very long time," he says.

Ben Mosley is one of them. An environmental and water engineer, he was working in Brisbane for engineering company Jacobs when the work started to dry up. "We were dependent on mining contracts. Business peaked around 2012, but then really dropped off. There are lots of small towns in rural Australia that have almost disappeared."

Jacobs offered him a job in their Wellington office, and it was a move he was happy to make.

"I really enjoy the New Zealand lifestyle. Wellington is big enough that you've got everything, but small enough that you actually recognise people on the street," says Mosley, who has found

the cost of living similar. "Rent is cheaper, but electricity is a lot more expensive. Groceries and other bills are similar to Australia. It seems to even out in the end." And he doesn't have to endure the inevitable office Aussie-ribbing alone – four other Australians also work there.

However, not all Australians view their move to New Zealand so positively. Several other engineers from a different company (who didn't want to be named) said they were given an ultimatum in Australia: be made redundant or move to New Zealand for 30 per cent less pay.

Paul Spoonley points out that many of the top firms in New Zealand are Australian-owned. "We see quite significant numbers of middle and senior management positions move from Australia to New Zealand, because they're looking after the interests of Australian companies."

There's nothing to suggest the current migration trends indicate a permanent turnaround; a freak wave, perhaps, rather than a turning of the tide.

"There are very few distinctions between the two countries," Hawthorne says. "New Zealanders generally want to live in a larger country with a larger economy and more diverse choices. And New Zealanders with some sort of skills

do fabulously in the Australian labour market. Young people, especially, will go where the opportunities are."

Those opportunities, according to Kiwi Melissa Bruorton, a 44-year-old curriculum developer at the University of Melbourne, will always be in Australia. "I'm a lifer!" she laughs. "I was lucky to come prior to 2001 so I have Australian citizenship; my kids are Aussie. I have a great career and my husband – also a Kiwi – earns \$45 an hour doing a job that would pay \$25 in New Zealand. Australia's been really good for me; it really still is the land of opportunities."

And there it is again, that magic date: 2001, when Howard went fishing for the so-called "Bondi bludgers". But the hook became a driftnet, trawling the Kiwis who worked hard and paid their taxes and got nothing in return except a slightly fatter pay cheque. Grudgingly, they accepted the deal in their hundreds of thousands.

But when the work dries up, New Zealanders – unburdened by the trappings of security or loyalty – happily jump back in the water and swim for home. And there's that word again: fluidity. So long, and thanks for all the fish. +