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The politics of departure and return in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Border restrictions introduced in response to the pandemic have complicated citizens' abilities to depart from, and return to, their countries of nationality.

Theme

Mobility Events

Keywords

Free movement, Australia, New Zealand, pandemic, citizenship

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Introduction

Our rights to free movement — protected under international law^{2,3} — have been indisputably impinged by the COVID-19 pandemic’s implications for international mobility. This is perhaps especially true in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, where droves of citizens have been barred from leaving and re-entering their countries of nationality. COVID-19 has raised further questions about the ethics of moving at all. SARS-CoV-2 is highly infectious; moving and interacting with others can now place us, and those around us, at significant risk of harm. Questions of whether we respect local lockdown and social distancing measures, or travel to other towns, regions and countries, have therefore taken on a distinctly moralistic value.⁴ This entry explores the politics of departure from and return to Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic, with attention to the ‘panic flight’ phenomenon, the legal and ethical implications of abrogating citizens’ rights to return and depart, and reflections on the future of international mobilities within the region.

Panic flights

When in March, Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand announced the imminent closure of their borders, warnings were issued to citizens and permanent residents abroad: return as soon as possible, or risk not being able to find a flight home in the future.⁵ In both countries, the announcements therefore triggered multiple ‘panic flights’ of foreign returnees.⁶ Multiple media reports document the complex decision-making processes faced by prospective returnees: the loss of work and income abroad, the security offered by Australia’s and Aotearoa-New Zealand’s strong public healthcare and welfare systems, and the prospect of not being able to see friends and family for an indefinite length of time are all frequently cited as reasons to return.⁷ These same decision-making processes emerged in my interviews with returned Australian citizens. 26-year-old Australian student Christina decided to return home from the United Kingdom in March, citing her growing feelings of unease with the UK’s approach to the pandemic, and the security and familiarity of her family in Australia, and the Australian healthcare system. These ‘pull’ factors remained strong despite her

² Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that ‘everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country’, while Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects rights to freedom of movement.

³ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 27: Freedom of Movement

⁴ Breakey, Hugh. 2020. Acting selfishly has consequences right now – why ethical decision making is imperative in the coronavirus crisis. *The Conversation*. 24 March 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/acting-selfishly-has-consequences-right-now-why-ethical-decision-making-is-imperative-in-the-coronavirus-crisis-134350>.

Last accessed January 2021; ABC News. 2020. Australians who want to return from overseas warned to do so ASAP ahead of possible COVID-19 border closures. 17 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-17/coronavirus-australians-should-return-home-from-overseas/12065050>. Last accessed 22 January 2021

⁵ Radio New Zealand. 2020. *Coronavirus: Call for all New Zealanders to return home*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/412015/coronavirus-call-for-all-new-zealanders-to-return-home>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

⁶ Menon, Praveen. 2020. New Zealand to limit returning citizens as quarantine facilities fill up. *Reuters*. 7 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-air-new-zealand/new-zealand-to-limit-returning-citizens-as-quarantine-facilities-fill-up-idUSKBN2472RZ>. Last accessed 22 January 2021; Tobin, Grace. 2020. As coronavirus restrictions tighten, returning Australians risk losing their flights if they don’t upgrade to business class. *ABC News*. 12 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-13/coronavirus-australians-risk-losing-return-flight-unless-upgrade/12443094>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

⁷ Dang, Annie. 2020. Expats returning to Australia due to COVID-19 outbreak: Reverse culture shock hits home. *Traveller*. July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.traveller.com.au/expats-returning-to-australia-due-to-covid19-outbreak-reverse-culture-shock-hits-home-h1pahm>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

networks in the UK, where she had a lease on an apartment, friends, and coverage under the NHS. 25-year-old student Francesca, who is a dual UK-Australian national, similarly decided to stay on in Australia following a short trip home from the UK in March due her concerns regarding the UK's much higher rate of infection.

The right to return

International travel to Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand has become increasingly difficult since March 2020. Globally, mobility restrictions introduced during the pandemic have severely disrupted the airline industry, limiting the number of international flights to both countries. Long-haul flights to Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand are also expensive for both airlines and individual passengers, and there are few other means of travelling into either country. Meanwhile, to ensure all returnees can be accommodated in state-managed isolation facilities before their release into the community, both countries' governments have placed weekly restrictions on the number of citizens and residents permitted to return.

Several thousand residents and citizens have therefore faced significant barriers to returning home. In Australia, many of their narratives are documented on a website, 'Remove the Cap', launched by a Dutch-Australian unable to return to Australia from Amsterdam.⁸ The website details narratives such as Zion's, a Townsville resident who was stranded in the Philippines for five months before finding a flight to Cairns via Papua New Guinea⁹; and Pam, an Australian citizen in Qatar, who could only find expensive business class flights home.¹⁰ Again, similar narratives emerged in my interviews with returnees. When Queensland resident Jack booked a flight from the UK to Australia in September 2020, he was repeatedly asked by the airline to upgrade to a business class flight. Several media reports confirm similar experiences:¹¹ as airlines incurred significant economic losses, many have reportedly lobbied passengers to purchase business class seats to increase their profitability, while often cancelling less profitable flights — leaving many Australians and New Zealanders stranded overseas unable to afford to return home.¹²

Meanwhile, both governments' responses to those who wish to return have been perceived as largely unsympathetic.¹³ In August 2020, the Australian Prime Minister defended the caps on returning residents as "frustrating" but "essential," reiterating that the government had advised them to return home in March.¹⁴ Grace, who in September, could not find a flight home to Brisbane from London to

⁸ Den Heten, Pieter. 2020. *Remove the Cap*. Available online at: <https://removethecap.com>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jackson, Lewis. 2020. Business class was my chance to get home. After 24 hours of niceness, I wish I had my \$7,000 back *The Guardian*. 13 October 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/oct/13/business-class-was-my-chance-to-get-home-after-24-hours-of-niceness-i-wish-i-had-my-7000-back>. Last accessed 22 January 2021; Tobin, Grace. 2020. As coronavirus restrictions tighten, returning Australians risk losing their flights if they don't upgrade to business class. *ABC News*. 12 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-13/coronavirus-australians-risk-losing-return-flight-unless-upgrade/12443094>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

¹² Den Heten 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thorn, Adam. 2020. PM 'Blames' Aussies Abroad for Struggle to Return Home. *Australian Aviation*. 26 August 2020. Available online at: <https://australianaviation.com.au/2020/08/pm-blames-aussies-abroad-for-struggle-to-return-home/>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

visit her terminally-ill parent, explains she was “hurt” by this dismissal, which, she believes, does not acknowledge the complexity of individuals’ lives. On *Remove the Cap*, Zion also states he feels “abandoned and disappointed” by Australia’s government,¹⁵ while Pam believes “it is unbelievable that our government and country are treating returning citizens in such an inhumane way.”¹⁶ These narratives highlight citizens’ sense of abandonment by the state – following from the abrogation of their right to return – and the complexity of life amid globalisation, where many people carry multiple national loyalties,¹⁷ defined by various political, legal, economic and social connections. While Grace and Francesca are dual Australian-UK nationals, their emotional ties to Australia, where they have immediate family, remain strong. Mobility restrictions introduced during the pandemic do not adequately recognise the salience of these multiple ties.

The right to depart

Australians’ and Aotearoa-New Zealanders’ rights to depart their countries of nationality have been profoundly disrupted by the pandemic’s consequences for international mobility. In Australia, citizens and permanent residents are categorically banned from travelling overseas, save for a handful of exemptions, such as being ordinarily a resident in another country; having urgent and unavoidable personal business; undertaking travel in the national interest; or seeking medical treatment unavailable in Australia.¹⁸ Those who wish to travel for one of these listed reasons must apply for a ‘travel exemption’ from the Australian Border Force prior to travelling, and bring a confirmation of their exemption to the airport at the time of departure. In contrast, while Aotearoa-New Zealanders are strongly advised against international travel,¹⁹ they are not subject to any legal ban.

Community responses to these restrictions are mixed. Media reports in both countries document individuals’ feelings of disappointment, and incurring of financial loss, after being forced to cancel their travel plans.²⁰ Many have also reported being unable to travel overseas to see their partners and families or to attend weddings and funerals.²¹ Meanwhile, Australia’s travel exemption system has drawn widespread criticism for its lack of transparency, and perceived arbitrariness.²² Jack, who has recently returned to Australia from the UK, tells me he is not concerned about not being able to leave, as there is nowhere in the world he would prefer to be other than Australia, given the country’s relatively successful management of the pandemic in relation to other areas of the world. In contrast, Christina expresses concerns about Australia’s increasing isolationism. Having recently completed a doctorate, she is reluctant to work in Australia. Stressing that, with a population of

¹⁵ Den Heten. 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Werbner, Pnina. 1999. Global pathways. Working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds. *Social Anthropology* 7(1): 17-35.

¹⁸ Department of Home Affairs. 2020. *COVID-19 and the border: Leaving Australia*. Available online at: <https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au/leaving-australia>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

¹⁹ Safetravel. 2020. *Official advice for New Zealanders living and travelling overseas: Travel advisories*. Available online at: <https://www.safetravel.govt.nz/travel-advisories>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

²⁰ Cunningham, Melissa. 2020. Australian Baby boomers told to cancel travel plans amid fears COVID-19 could hit them hardest. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 5 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/not-ok-boomer-older-australians-told-to-rethink-overseas-travel-plans-20200304-p546st.html>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

²¹ McGuirk, Rod. 2020. Australia’s pandemic travel ban brings family heartbreak. *AP News*. 29 October 2020. Available online at: <https://apnews.com/article/travel-virus-outbreak-pandemics-australia-germany-4f64b1e5dda462b01f98b945553f198d>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

²² Shine, Rhiannon. 2020. ‘Red tape’ forcing families to wait for compassionate exemption to coronavirus travel ban, grieving son says. *ABC News*. 25 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-25/coronavirus-travel-ban-exemption-red-tape-criticised/12388946>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

just 26 million, Australia is likely to suffer a serious lack of industrial innovation, she hopes the border restrictions will soon be eased.

Scores of returning citizens have raised further questions about a potential ‘brain gain’ to the region in the coming years. Media reports documenting returning Australians’ and Aotearoa-New Zealanders’ motivations indicate that, like this report’s respondents, both countries’ citizens have greater faith in the countries’ handling of the pandemic, which has influenced their decisions to move home.²³ Many of these returnees are skilled professionals, who, under normal circumstances, would have chosen to continue living and working overseas.²⁴ The pandemic may, therefore, have provided both countries with a chance to capitalise on a “reverse brain drain”, and reconfigure their local economies.²⁵

Still, Christina’s concerns are pertinent. Australians and New Zealanders have become accustomed to being able to live and work overseas. Both countries’ passports are among the world’s strongest, allowing access to hundreds of countries. The pandemic has thus fundamentally threatened this privilege. Much has been written regarding COVID-19’s implications for transnationalism: researchers have alternately highlighted the fortification of the nation-state, illustrated through widespread border closures and scores of returning citizens, and a move towards alternative modes of transnationalism, such as increasing digitisation within industry. While Australians and Aotearoa-New Zealanders may not be able to live and work abroad as freely as they once did, there may be increasing scope for international collaboration through other means.

²³ Frost, Natasha. 2020. New Zealand’s ‘brain gain’ boost. *BBC*. 7 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200827-new-zealands-brain-gain-boost>. Last accessed 22 January 2021; Wood, Patrick. 2020. COVID-19 pandemic offers ‘single greatest opportunity’ to reverse Australia’s brain drain. But there are catches. *ABC News*, 29 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-29/coronavirus-pandemic-could-reverse-australia-brain-drain/12654606>. Last accessed 22 January 2021.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*