
What is Australia? Perception versus Reality*

Phillip Knightley

The quotation in the flyer for this lecture about Australia being a ‘cultural desert populated by poisonous spiders’ comes from a British columnist who writes for the *Sunday Times*. The full quote goes:

We must thank God for the South of France. He did really well there. But we mustn't let Him forget Australia—a wide cultural desert populated by man-eating sharks, poisonous snakes, spiders and men in shorts.

I was thinking, when preparing for this lecture, how I would pour scorn on this outrageous statement of such a misinformed portrait. Then suddenly I read in the paper that sharks had eaten two people off the coast of Western (actually South) Australia and attacked a third person in Sydney; a man had died of snakebite in northern New South Wales; and hordes of funnel web spiders had invaded North Sydney. So, bang! That one went out the window.

Never mind, I thought I'd concentrated instead on the ‘cultural desert’ then, and show how sophisticated and worldly-wise Australia is now. Then I heard that someone in Melbourne had launched a new boutique beer called ‘Piss’, with the slogan ‘*Taking the Piss*’.

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I was recovering from that when, reading the Australia Day honours list, my eye was caught by a medal of the Order of Australia—awarded to Joan Bradshaw of Peshurst—for ‘fundraising by the Australian Order of Old Bastards’. I’m sure it’s quite a worthy organisation, but couldn’t we think of a better name for it? You can’t quite see it in the London *Times*, can you? ‘Her Majesty the Queen is pleased to confer a CBE on Mrs Jane Eggleton for fundraising for the Honourable Order of Pommy Bastards.’ It just wouldn’t work there. It doesn’t sing.

At the bottom of the same page as the honours list, as published in the *Australian*, was a list of honours awarded to the dogs of year, in the Great Australian Dog of the Year list. Now I know we all love animals, but how can you explain a dog called ‘Commando’ getting an award for ‘contributions to anthropology and reconciliation in the Northern Territory’? What did he *do*, that little dog? Dig up some bones? And then another one called ‘Coke’ got an award for ‘services to the New South Wales building industry’. I worked out what that was—he’s that blue kelpie that sits in the back of the ute guarding the building supplies while the boys are away having a beer.

As I was leaving for Australia, a friend of mine said: ‘I suppose you’ll be writing something about their state elections and that woman who runs that party up in Queensland—what’s her name? I suppose she’ll be back again?’ I said, ‘No, you can forget about her, that’s all over!’ And of course, as soon as I arrived in Sydney and picked up the papers, there’s Pauline Hanson smiling out of the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

I think that’s the problem in trying to decipher Australia. Just when you think you’ve grasped what it’s all about, it suddenly slips away again and you realise that it is a very different place from what you imagine when you’re looking at it from abroad. This is not ‘Britain Down Under’. It’s not a slice of Europe or Asia. It’s not a branch office of America. It is a very different place.

I thought about the possibility that perhaps the English language is to blame—that because we speak English, Americans speak English and the British speak English, then anybody coming here will immediately understand what everything is all about. Wrong.

In London in the 1950s I knew a journalist called Rex Lopez. He was born in Gibraltar, but brought up and educated in Britain. He worked in the London bureau of a group of Australian newspapers. He had worked with Australians all his adult life, had married an Australian girl, and had kids who went to Australian schools when he emigrated here.

Then he went to work for the Sydney *Daily Mirror*, and the tough news editor said, ‘Rex, do you think you’ll be able to handle the news tips telephone? You sit at the phone over there, and people ring you with news tips, then you pass it on to us and we send somebody to cover the story.’ Rex said ‘Yeah, of course I can.’ The editor said, ‘You realise there are a lot of slang words and strange places ...’ Rex said he could handle it easily.

When the phone rang, he picked it up and somebody shouted down the phone: ‘Willy willy at Woy Woy!’, and hung up.

Poor old Rex Lopez’s confidence that he understood Australia was shattered and he never recovered it.

The British actor Stephen Fry told of finding himself—after a long day in Hollywood dealing with tough producers, and feeling low, tired and depressed—in the Polo Lounge at the Beverley Hills Hotel. He said he then heard the sound of a familiar voice. He said: ‘A healing wave of homesickness swept over me like a moist mountain wind—I forgot America and it’s billion-dollar entertainment industry and I suddenly knew I was English and I could never be anything else.’ Well, the familiar voice, of course, turned out to be Rolf Harris. But he says that when you’re alone in the Polo Lounge, the fluting tones of one of Australia’s greatest sons beckon you home like a lighthouse.

So let’s us examine some current views held by foreigners about Australia, test their validity, compare them to the reality—and then decide whether it matters or not.

Let’s take Britain and the United States first, because I feel they should know better. It’s OK for the French to spell it S-i-d-n-e-y, and for the Russians to believe that there are kangaroos in the streets, but the British and the Americans *should* know better.

During the Olympics the *New York Times* had a large team of sports reporters over here, but they had some general reporters as well. One was a business reporter, and he went around asking local journalists for story ideas about Australian business. Each time they put forward an idea, the business reporter would look puzzled and say: ‘But how can I work Tom Keneally into that story?’ And they’d say, ‘Why do you want to work Tom Keneally into it?’ He said, ‘Well, my editor back in New York knows Tom Keneally—the only Australian name he’s ever heard of—and he knows about *Schindler’s List*, and if we can work Tom Keneally and *Schindler’s List* into a business story, they’re more likely to use as it will be in the editor’s comfort zone.’

An edition of the *New York Times* about federation had a headline: ‘Australia honours its founders, but can’t remember their names.’ And they took delight in pointing out that our own official book on federation said that Australians know more about George Washington than about Edmund Barton. That’s probably a justified criticism.

Another headline in the same *New York Times* ran: ‘No worries for an ancient nation.’ The story itself said: ‘Australians say “no worries” all the time because they’re so incredibly insecure.’

Jeremy Clarkson, the journalist who made the remark about Australia being a cultural desert populated by men in shorts, later realised, while the Games were going on, that there *are* intelligent Australians—they’re to be found in the bars around Earls Court.

And the London *Observer*—who you'd think might know better—wrote:

In January 1999 a group of British MPs—the Commons Culture Committee—travelled all the way out to Australia to find out why Australians were so much better at sport than we are. At the time of writing, Australia, with a population of nineteen million, are world cricket champions, world rugby union champions, world tennis champions, world netball champions, world women's hockey champions and world men's and women's surfing champions.

The MPs' trip to discover why all this was so gave them a chance to air a double stereotype. The answer is that wonderful weather. It keeps children outdoors all day doing sporty things. Our weather keeps us indoors. That's why their cultural achievements are on a par with our sporting triumphs—few and far between. Perhaps their Cultural Committee will fly over here to London to investigate why the finest flower of Australian TV is *Neighbours*.

But the reality is startlingly different. We don't spend all our time playing sport. Here's just a list of a few things that Australia has managed to do in the past hundred years. Some of them came as a great surprise to me.

- we invented a xerox photocopying process as long ago as 1907
- we discovered an anthrax vaccine in 1918
- we invented the black box flight recorder, that all aircraft are now fitted with
- Qantas invented the inflatable escape slide for aircraft
- we pioneered microsurgery
- we invented the bionic ear
- we invented *in vitro* fertilisation
- we invented plastic banknotes
- we developed the first multi-focal contact lens
- and we invented the Olympic torch that can burn in rain, hail or shine.

From that list I have left out other great Australian inventions like Vegemite, Minties, Iced Vo-Vos—the important things of life.

Here is a quick list of Australian high achievers on the international stage. I'll skip the obvious ones like Sir Les Patterson, Kylie Minogue and Clive James, in favour of some unknown to many Australians.

- Mark Newsome, leading British designer
- Harry Kewell, leading British soccer player for Leeds United
- Geoffrey Crawford, who runs the Royal household
- the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government of the UK is an Australian, Sir Robert May
- the Principal Ballerina in the Royal Ballet is Leanne Benjamin
- Yvonne Kenny is a well-known opera singer
- Professor Peter Morris is a surgeon scientist

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- Kate Blanchett, the actress
 - The Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University is an Australian, Sir Alex Groves
 - Patricia Hewitt is in the House of Commons
 - the Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords is an Australia, Baroness Gardiner of Parkes
 - Geoffrey Robertson QC, the civil rights lawyer
 - Michael Blakemore, film and theatre critic, and producer
 - John Williams, world famous classical guitarist
 - Robert O'Neal, the Water Story boy
 - Peter Porter the poet
 - Sir Kip McMahon, the banker.

We could go on an on. The only time the *New York Times* managed to slightly redeem itself in Australian eyes was in reviewing *Homesickness* by Murray Bail, when it said that he ranked as one of the three indisputably world-class Australian novelists currently practicing. Now three world-class novelists from a population of 19 million would put Australia ahead of Britain and probably the United States on a per capita basis, in the cultural stakes (novelist division), if one was so crass as to make such a comparison.

A lucky country, then. A lucky country where the high standard of living has come about not by the efforts of its people but from its commodities and natural resources? That is an outdated view. True, in 1900 wool was king. A hundred years later, Australia made about six times more money from tourism than from wool. So successful was its manufacturing export business that, despite removing most tariff protection, it had a trade surplus for most years of the last decade of the century.

Australia ranks sixteenth in the list of the world's top industrial nations. It survived the Asian economic crisis intact. On average, its economy is growing faster than that of the United States, and most of the economies of Western Europe. Its savings rate is higher than that of Britain, the United States, or Canada, and only slightly lower than France or Germany. Its tax rate is lower than Europe, and only a little higher than the United States. Government debt was lower than that in the United States, Japan and most of Western Europe, and its low inflation rate is the best of the world's advanced economies.

Leading market economist John Edwards says: 'Compared to the United States, Japan, France, Germany or New Zealand, the place is actually quite well run.' Then he says: 'The harder story to tell is of Australia's success.'

Racism? Well, the fastest growing classification in Australia today is one where people describe themselves as being of 'ethnic mix'. Everyone, even that most racist of communities, the Chinese, is now marrying out. Padraic McGuinness—not the most tolerant of commentators—has said that Australia is the most successful high immigration society and the most successful, tolerant, multicultural society in the world today.

I am aware of those refugee camps scattered around the far distant parts of the Australian coastline, but I'm confident that when more is known about them, Australians will cease to tolerate them.

The country where nothing ever happens? Think about that when you're overseas and you're desperately trying to find out what's happening in Australia from reading the local papers or watching television—nothing! But it doesn't seem like that when you live here, it seems all go, go, go to me. And even if it were true—so what? Would you rather live in Australia, with 'nothing happening', or live in the Middle East, Iraq or the Balkans? Plenty happening there.

I think that some people are just not happy unless they're suffering. The Russian writer Vitali Vitalio migrated to Australia, but went back to the northern hemisphere after only two years, complaining of 'spiritual heartburn'. He said that life in Australia was too good, and the people are too happy.

My own view about how we got to this situation is that 200 or so years ago, Australia embarked on a major economic and sociological experiment—one that's still going on. That was the free-market society, where the government takes care of the young and the sick and the old and the poor and where the worker gets a fair go. The reasoning of idealistic Australians back in the 1800s was simple—Australia appears to be a country of limitless potential (although that's now being challenged by some environmental writers).

If we're genuine in our wish to create a new society, to leave behind the class division of the old world, to avoid servility and poverty, then we should divide everything in a fair and reasonable manner. So 'fair and reasonable' became the touchstone of the Australian way of life—'Give us a fair go, mate'; 'Fair crack of the whip, sport'; 'Give us a fair suck of the sav'. And it's been repeated incessantly in pleas and judicial decisions, trade union conferences and parliamentary debates, because it appeals to a vital human need.

Matt Ridley, in *The Origins of Virtue*, explains how citizens of early hunter-gatherer societies evolved a strong sense of fairness so as to ensure that all of them would commit themselves to communal enterprise. This placed an obligation on the powerful to treat their peers and their underlings decently, and a duty on those underlings and peers to *demand* decent treatment. Our sense of fairness is therefore inherited, a natural human emotion that some of us may feel is threatened by a *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Other Australian characteristics flow from their commitment to a fair and reasonable social system. Australians hate officiousness and authority, especially when embodied in military officers and policemen. Because in their experience, both are unlikely to give you a fair go. Australians are suspicious of discipline, and have great wariness about elites (except perhaps in sport), because those imposing the discipline are unlikely to be reasonable and elites are often reluctant to extend the fair go beyond their own members.

D.H. Lawrence—who wrote one of the best books about Australia, *Kangaroo*—saw all this as a recipe for anarchy. In Australia, nobody’s supposed to rule, and nobody *does* rule. The proletariat appoints men to administer the law, not to rule. These ministers are not really responsible, any more than a housemaid is responsible. The proletariat is all the time responsible—the only source of authority. The will of the people. Now Lawrence accepted that this was real democracy, but he didn’t like it, because he was an Englishman, with an Englishman’s instinct for authority. And in Australia, authority was a dead letter.

It is certainly difficult to exercise authority in an egalitarian society. Lawrence found himself longing for the certainty of India—and this phrase sticks in my mind—for ‘the responsibility of command and the pleasure of obedience’. Now it might work in India, but it wouldn’t work here. In Australian society—long before Manning Clark gave the young historian Geoffrey Searle the following advice on how to behave in Britain: ‘Call no biped Lord or Sir and touch your hat to no man’—Australians had extended the original egalitarian idea to: no-one can tell me what to do. And as Lawrence writes: ‘There was no giving of orders here, or, if orders were given, they wouldn’t be received as such. A man in one position might make a *suggestion* to a man in another position, and this latter might or might not accept the suggestion according to his disposition.’

That attitude was confirmed for me the other day as I watched the Australian Navy rehearsing for Navy Day. The officer commanding the parade explained to the sailors before he gave an order the reason why he was going to give this order—with the view no doubt that if they understood why he was going to do it, they were more likely to follow it to the letter. Otherwise they might not. It went a bit like this: ‘Now I want you to stand at ease now, because we’ve got about three minutes before the band comes up, so stand at ease.’ So they knew what they were doing.

But Lawrence wondered how a country could run like this. He wondered if all that stood between Australia and anarchy was the shadow of British authority reaching out over thousands of miles of sea. Britain, Empire, the King, the Governor-General. But the country did run and—in a manner unprecedented anywhere in the world—passed law after law to improve the welfare of its citizens. It introduced votes for women 18 years ahead of the United States, 16 years ahead of Britain, and 70 years ahead of Switzerland. The secret ballot, free and compulsory education for all, old age and invalid pensions, safety at work, fixed working hours, minimum wages, legal arbitration system, and even as early as 1908—of some personal interest to me—there was a pension of one pound a week for distressed authors.

The benefits were quickly reflected in the wellbeing of white Australians. The country soon had one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world, and it would have been hard to name any other country that looked after its aged as well as Australia. Both factors are indications of a decent, caring society. In 1999, despite economic rationalism, Australia was still spending 54 cents of every government dollar on health and welfare. This was a greater amount, for example, than the United States spent on defence in the Second World War. And that welfare spending goes up every year regardless of which party is in power. It is not a party political issue.

Australia runs a more democratic democracy than, say, that paragon of the free world, the United States. To start with, most Americans don't vote at all, as we've seen recently. They stay away from the polls in their millions. Next, although we read a lot about political funding scandals in America, most Americans—93 percent—have never given a single cent to any political party. Yet only a very rich man or a professional politician with access to millions of dollars stands a chance of running for President, and the four-yearly national election campaign lasts a whole year and costs billions of dollars to run.

In contrast, Australian prime ministers have included an engine driver (Ben Chifley), a trade union official (Bob Hawke) and a one-time bottle washer (Billy Hughes). The Australian election campaign every three years lasts about a month and costs less than a single Senate race in California.

Finally, most American citizens have never met their elected official at any level, not even their local councillor. In Australia, television has lately taken away some of the personal contact between candidate and voter, but before that—and I remember it well—every candidate was expected to turn up at a hall in their constituency (or in the street if they were brave enough), and submit themselves to questions and the odd rotten tomato or two. In small-town Australia, many are on hand-shaking terms with the mayor and most of the councillors.

So yes, foreign perceptions of Australia can be stereotypes, and are sometime wrong. Should we do anything about it? At first I thought we should. I had grandiose ideas of trying to persuade the government to put up some money to bring prominent foreign journalists out here on two or three year scholarships, to show them around Australia so they could go back and at least write on some of the good things about the place. But I'm not so sure any more. In this media-dominated age, Australia's image in Britain has been largely in the hands of Germaine Greer, Clive James, Rolf Harris and Sir Les Patterson. The first two can hold their intellectual and cultural own in any company, and in fact often set the agenda for debate in Britain about British matters. No-one cracks crude, anti-Australian jokes in their presence. For his part, Rolf Harris has become the caring face of Australia—the modern, gentle post-feminist man. 'If all Australian men are like him', an English woman friend told me recently, 'then no wonder so few Australian girls come to London these days.'

So perceptions of Australia are already changing, rendered clearer and sharper by the Sydney Olympics—'the greatest seventeen days of sport in the history of the planet', as spectators decided. And the brighter British sports writers looked beyond the Games and saw a new Australia. 'My salute to the Games is also a salute to Australia', wrote Simon Barnes of the *Times*, '... this most aspirational of cultures, seeking to discover itself so eagerly, without the baggage of history—that nightmare from which we are trying to awake—and to the envy of Australia that invariably stirs in the breasts of visiting English.'

Yet stale jokes and misconceptions about Australia will hang around. But one mark of an adult nation has got to be the ability to laugh at itself, and not be too concerned about what others think of it. So I suppose in a funny way, Sir Les *is* Australia's Cultural Attaché, embodying as he does one of the better characteristics of

Australians, so envied by the rest of the world—he shows deference to no-one. His influence pops up in the most unlikely places. When the history of republicanism in Australia comes to be written, one incident should figure prominently, and that is that day in 1992 when Prime Minister Paul Keating put his arm around the Queen—a Les Patterson moment, if ever there was one.

Contrary to tabloid reports in Britain at the time—'Hands Off, Cobber!'—most British were envious. Keating had done something that the Queen's own subjects dare not do. 'Never touch the Royal Family unless they touch you first', advised Monty Python.

Keating's gesture was not seen as a lack of manners or sophistication, but a genuine Australian desire to embrace a fellow human being. The British looked at Keating and saw a Twenty-first Century Australian. One with no sense of class. They envied Australia for it, and from that day onward, neither the Royal Family nor their relationship with Australia, have been the same.

So if Barry Humphries eventually decides that perhaps Les Patterson has had his day because he no longer reflects the new Australia, I don't think we should forget him. Let's try to keep a little of Les's most endearing and essentially Australian characteristics—his confidence in who he is, his certainty about where he's going, and the fact that he doesn't give a stuff what others think about him.

From this long and educational journey, writing about the land in which I was born, if I were asked to make a decision on one quality about Australians that stood out, I'd nominate their sense of collectivism. Although it has faltered at times, the predominant Australian characteristic, I think, is the feeling that whatever may be, come the crunch, they're in it together. One for all, and all for one.

'Since they excel at sports, Australians rule the world', said the *Guardian*. 'Australia is the greatest sporting nation on earth', said the *Spectator*. I turn to cricket to make my point. When Mark Taylor played his fiftieth test match as captain of his country, Steven Fay, a writer more English than whom it would be hard to imagine, wrote a long newspaper profile of Taylor. Most of it was about cricket, one of Fay's passions (he's the editor of the *Wisden Cricketing Monthly*.) And when he had exhausted the topic of cricket, he switched off his tape recorder, and both interviewer and interviewee relaxed. Then suddenly Taylor began to muse about the Australian character, and Fay switched on his recorder again. Taylor said:

Competition is a part of life, but it's about losing too. I'm trying to teach my six-year-old this. He loves winning, but the bottom line is, there are times when you'll have a bad run and you'll need to call on your inner strength and become a better person. That's what I like so much about team sports. In England last year, and before that, I hadn't played any worse throughout my entire career, and yet I was still a winner. I was a loser personally, but the team was winning. What better lesson can you get for living than that? That—although you may not be doing too well yourself—if you just hang in there, and play your part, you too can be a winner.

When he'd reported this very Australian philosophy of life, the Englishman Steven Fay added his own comment: 'Australia's lucky to have Mark Taylor, but then it was Australia that made him.'



Question — I'm a first-generation Australian, and I love it here—I wouldn't live anywhere else. You made a very import point in your talk about how the Olympics have improved our image overseas and how we can build on that. Do you have any idea how we can do that?

Phillip Knightley — I think it's going to happen no matter what we do. So many people went back with such wonderful impressions after the Games that it will spread. I think that is already being reflected in the number of tourists that are coming to Australia. As for how the Games actually changed things, I can give you a very quick example: in a review of my book that appeared before the Olympic Games, the headline said '*A Nation Australia, a nation that thrives on mateship and camping*'. Camping? But after the book had been published, the headlines and the attitude changed, and this one now says 'All mates in a place of marvels'.

Question — You said a great deal about the Australian interest in fairness. I subscribe to that; I once wrote a book called *Fair Go*. But I'd like you to give a few instances of lack of fairness—for example, towards refugees; and can you give an example of fairness towards Aborigines? How can you find examples of this sense of fairness, and how is it working out?

Phillip Knightley — Well I don't think anybody ever said it was going to be easy to change Australia in the course of 70 years, or even less. But the changes are remarkable and they continue to occur. If you'd told my mother 40 years ago that there would be a mosque in Lakemba, or that there'd be a statue of Buddha in the main street of Hobart, she wouldn't have believed it. And the way that multicultural Australia has formed itself shows progress.

Nobody ever said it was going to be easy to find some form of reconciliation with the Aborigines, but things are being done and things are happening. It's a slow process but I think it will accelerate as the younger generation comes to the fore. Young Australians are all for multiculturalism, lack of racism, and fairness to the Aboriginal people. Otherwise you wouldn't have got 250 000 young Australians marching over the Sydney Harbour Bridge last year, to say sorry. But it's not going to be easy, and if it were too easy, then it wouldn't be worthwhile. It's going to be hard and tough, but it is happening and there is progress.

Question — If Australia's so great, why did you move to London to work, and why do you not spend the whole year here? You spend time in London and Bombay, and you worked for the *Sunday Times* for 20 years in London. Surely perhaps there's more excitement and opportunity elsewhere?

Phillip Knightley — I left because it seemed a good idea at the time. I've thought since that I might have made a mistake—that, if I'd stayed, I might have had a chance to have played some small part in these wonderful changes that have occurred in this country. But I'd already committed myself.

I don't consider myself an expatriate. The world is such a small place now and air travel is relatively inexpensive, I could be home tomorrow if I had to be. So I don't think you need to say you're an expatriate. I'm an Australian who lives part of the year in London and a Londoner who lives part of the year in Australia. I married an Indian woman, so I also spend part of the time in India. But my kids are Londoners, even though they spend a lot of time in Australia. I think those old national divisions are going out the window.

Question — Certain commentators in this country explain everything that ever happens in terms of an alleged great divide between the capital cities and the bush. Would you like to comment on that?

Phillip Knightley — I tried not to do that, by spending a lot of time in outback Australia. I deliberately spent more time in the west, because I thought Western Australia got a rather bad deal in the eastern press. I thought it a shame that more Australians didn't spend time visiting the wonderful scenic tours of Western Australia, rather than going to Fiji or New Zealand. I had hoped that I managed to gather from that some idea of how country people feel. But that too is not easy. Just as you feel you've got a grasp on the 'real' Australia, it slips away from you. So I don't consider the book by any means finished—I'm busy working on the next edition already, and I hope to take into account all the criticisms that the book has attracted, and the blank areas in my research that have now become apparent to me.

Question — When do you think that Australia might become a republic?

Phillip Knightley — Within my lifetime. I would think it would happen very rapidly. Depending on the results of the next federal election, I would think within the next three years.

Question — What would be the effect of this change in Australia, on England? Will that change the monarchy in any way, by helping the British think that maybe the monarchy is costing them more than it should?

Phillip Knightley — My worry as an Australian living in Britain was that Britain would become a republic before Australia did. Some people say that Tony Blair is actually an Australian, because of the way that he's trying to run Britain. He is not in awe of history, he changes things that need to be changed, and he doesn't defer to the Queen in the manner that other British leaders have done.

I think the Queen is quite happy to go. There are various indications—and the Queen never tells anyone anything directly—that have leaked out from Buckingham Palace that she would be quite happy if Australia were suddenly to announce that it was a republic tomorrow. Because the links will remain, and it has been reported that the Queen has said that if the difficulty in Australia is in calling it a republic, they should

just become an independent Commonwealth. They should just keep the phrase ‘the independent Commonwealth’ and they could get on with it a lot faster than they are.

Question — How is it that Canada, which federated in 1867 and is divided between French and British government, has had changes made but has never considered in its constitution becoming a republic, and yet it became a Commonwealth 37 years before Australia?

Phillip Knightley — I suspect that, once Australia leads the way, Canada will not be far behind.

Question — During the course of your talk I thought on occasion you were about to mention compulsory voting, but you backed off. I wondered why you did that? And how do you see that sitting in your vision of Australia given that, in that part of the world (which is most of it these days) which professes to be democratic, Australia almost uniquely still marches its citizens to the electoral booths?

Phillip Knightley — I think compulsory voting is an excellent idea. It makes you think. You don’t *have* to vote—you can go there and tear up the ballot paper or write rude words on it, but you have to think about it. The fine is not a large one if you don’t vote, but it does make you think, and it makes you interested in the politics of your country.

I think the other people around the world fighting for the right to vote would agree that it is a privilege hard won and often bought at the cost of bloodshed, and it should not be lightly regarded. But when I tell Americans this, they say that you can’t compel people to vote. The result is that millions of Americans don’t vote at all.

Question — You alluded earlier on to ‘Aussie bashing’ in England. You referred earlier to Simon Barnes saying a few kind words about us, but it must have been the only time because he delights in criticism of Australian rugby. Another example is when you read about young kids arriving at the airport only to be put on the first plane back, for no other rational reason other than that they’re Australian. From the British point of view, is there a reason for this attitude, or do the Poms just not like us?

Phillip Knightley — I don’t think it’s that they don’t like you. It was very embarrassing when John Howard and four or five ex-Prime Ministers were actually in the House of Commons celebrating the centenary of federation, and outside people were buying copies of the *Evening Standard*, which reported the story of an 18-year-old Australian student who had arrived at Heathrow airport that afternoon on a tourist visa, and because the immigration officer searching her baggage had found a copy of her CV, he said that was *prima facie* evidence that she was looking for work. So he put her on the first plane back to Australia. Outrageous.

There were others, apart from Simon Barnes, who looked at the Games and saw wonderful things, but there was one reporter from the *Guardian* (who has not been seen around Fleet Street since last September) who, in the *Guardian’s* guide to the Olympics, wrote as follows: ‘Sydney is about to host the most scandal-ridden, self-serving, nepotistic and muddled Olympics in the whole history of the Games.’

Question — You are fairly critical of the way foreign media report on Australia, but are we any better when reporting on Britain? When you come here and see British scandals reported, do you see a difference in the way they are reported and the attitude of Australian journalists?

Phillip Knightley — I think that the major Australian newspapers' foreign news is quiet good. I read it all, including its coverage of Britain and its general coverage of the rest of the world. You get a fairly good idea of what's going on—much more so than you would get from reading a British paper about Australia. I can't think of anything that I've read in the last week or so that hasn't given me a reasonably accurate and objective picture of what's occurring in Britain. But a lot of it, of course, does come under syndication rules from British papers to begin with. Mr Murdoch doesn't see why he should pay to have foreign correspondents abroad when he already has a paper there and he can just lift what he wants out of it.

Question — I was grateful for your list of influential Australians. They occur in very interesting places. I would ask you to consider adding Jim Wolfenson, the President of the World Bank.

Phillip Knightley — I should also have mentioned the great success of Australian winemakers, and Australian chefs abroad. In South America Sir James Goldsmith had one of the most luxurious holiday resorts in the world, and when he died it was taken over by the Orient Express Company. They turned it into what they claim will be the most luxurious, expensive hotel that has ever been seen in the hemisphere. And they chose an Australian-trained chef.

Australian red wines are now starting to really and seriously hurt French red wines. When two Australian wines won gold medals at a recent event that had also been entered by the French, the secretary of the French Winemakers' Association (a bad loser) said afterwards, 'We have been making wines for 400 years and if people are attracted by these new young wines, why should we even bother to compete any more?' He then announced that they weren't even going to compete. A case of 'If you won't let me win, I'm going home.'

Question — Could you comment on the position of women in Australian society, compared with the rest of the world? As a Dutchman living here, it seems that it is much harder for Australian women to reach the top positions in society than it is in western European countries. Particularly in politics, it seems that women trying to become successful are hounded out by their male fellow politicians.

Phillip Knightley — Legislation is in place which offers women absolute equality in the workplace, because I think the people who formed that legislation believed that it was possible to force men to treat women as equals in the workplace. The problem I think is probably in the home. Behaviour in the household can't be legislated. Although there is some progress—I went to the fourth cricket test in Sydney, and I saw a group of 20 or so western suburbs building workers there, and one of them had brought his wife along. It was her job to stand in the beer queue.

In personal experience, my sister is married to a former wool classer, a real dinky-di Aussie. She has had a frozen shoulder for some time, and was trying to sweep the kitchen out the other day, and was in pain. Her husband came in the back door, and she handed him the broom and asked him to sweep. She said that his hand came out to take the broom, when he suddenly realised what he was doing, and his hand just wouldn't go any further. He *wanted* to help, but he just couldn't manage it. So he went out and got the leaf-blower, and 'swept' the kitchen with that.