

Getting involved: Civil society, national identity and belonging amongst expatriate New Zealanders in London

Summary

New Zealand-focused civil society organisations in London play a significant role in both supporting and strengthening a sense of national identity amongst their members. While some contribute to the New Zealand government's focus on business networks overseas, the organisations also fulfil the less obvious but equally important task of building a subjective sense of national belonging amongst expatriates and protecting and enhancing New Zealand's national reputation. Some – notably Māori – participants felt a stronger sense of belonging within their New Zealand-focused

organisation than they felt at 'home' and reported more positive interactions with both Māori and European/Pākehā. This suggests that the expatriate experience offers unique opportunities for personal growth and development, as well as national identity construction, which could benefit New Zealand more generally.

Nonetheless, the research also highlighted how the sense of national identity the organisations seek to construct is frequently challenged in an expatriate context by significant overlaps with Australian or South African cultures. There was further evi-

dence that key tensions around the role of Māori and Māori culture in New Zealand's national story remain unresolved and – to a lesser extent – ambivalence around masculinised symbols of nationhood continues. These findings are not surprising, but they indicate a need for deeper reflection on what it means to be a New Zealander than recent debates about changing the flag have offered. There is also a need for such debates to be inclusive of those who continue to imagine themselves as part of the national community while living overseas.

Introduction

In August-September 2015, 11 London-based participants took part in a small study investigating the civil society activities that New Zealanders engage in while living overseas, as well as how it shapes their understandings of belonging and national identity. The project aimed to highlight the

significant contribution that expatriate New Zealanders make to both their host society and to New



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/timmorris/3103896345>

Zealand while living overseas. It was a pilot study for a broader research project examining how expatriate New Zealanders practice and realise citizenship across three spheres – political, economic and civil society – while living in a range of overseas locations.

Thanks to all of the London-based participants who took part, as well as those who helped with recruitment

This report does not use quotes or personal or organisation names to protect the anonymity of participants belonging to the small number of organisations within the tightly-knit London expatriate community. None of the participants' views represent the official viewpoint of the civil society organisation to which they belonged.



This study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 19/7/15 for three years. Reference number 015353.

Methods and sample

The 11 participants who took part in qualitative, semi-structured interviews all belonged to New Zealand-focused civil society organisations established in London. 'Civil society engagement' can include: formal or informal volunteering; belonging to a community/cultural group, sports club, social justice movement or religious-based organisation; or donating funds or time to a charity organisation. But in this study all participants were involved in formal organisations including: two professional bodies, a business network, two Māori cultural groups (four participants in total), two educational/social organisations (three participants in total) and one using social media to provide information to New Zealanders on their 'Overseas Experience' (OE).

There was no clear pattern as to why expatriates had become engaged in volunteer work. Some had been involved in civil society activities prior to leaving New Zealand and/or had parents who were heavily involved while others found the experience of being a New Zealander in London provided both the motivation and opportunity to become engaged in civil society.

Recruitment

Six of the 14 contact persons named on a list of civil society organisations available on the New Zealand High Commission website agreed to take part when contacted directly by email. Two forwarded information to another person in their organisation who agreed to participate, while a third proposed an individual who volunteered time for an organisation not listed on the website but otherwise met the criteria for participation and a fourth suggested I attend a meeting of her organisation where three additional people were recruited. All participants were involved in the organisations as volunteers, except for one who was in a paid role but contributed many extra hours of voluntary labour at this job each week.

Sample

The OE population has been described as relatively homogenous because the majority are young, come from similar social backgrounds and are very transient, but this study's small sample was more diverse. Of seven females and four males interviewed, four identified as Māori (one also identified with a second ethnic group), while the

others were from New Zealand's majority ethnic group (referring to themselves variously as 'white', 'European' or 'Pākehā'; the latter term will be used for brevity). Two participants, aged in their mid-20s, were relatively recent arrivals (two years or under) but most had lived between eight and 40-plus years overseas and were aged between their late 30s and early 60s. The majority left during the traditional OE age range (mid-to-late 20s) but four participants embarked on their travels in their 30s or 40s, with one coming with children and a spouse and another left grown children in New Zealand. Only one participant had departed New Zealand without some kind of professional or vocational qualification, although three were not using this qualification in their current employment and only two also had some work experience before they left New Zealand.

Two participants lived outside of the official boundaries of London in a neighbouring county but were included in the study because they either commuted to or had previously lived in London.

Asides from the two participants who were relatively early in their overseas journey and could not yet commit to long-term plans, all others identified themselves as ‘accidental expats’ who had not left New Zealand planning to stay away from New Zealand permanently. The opportunity to travel, family and better employment prospects/wages kept

them in the UK and only two participants had certain plans to return. For others, a return was desirable but likely to be in retirement or delayed indefinitely given articulated problems faced by returnees, including poorer work opportunities/wages and a sense of geographical isolation. All, however, had regular physical/virtual social and econom-

ic ties with New Zealand and those with children visited frequently to ensure they felt an affiliation for their homeland.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_New_Zealand



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Homemade_Pavlova_02.jpg

FINDINGS

Building and strengthening national identity

National identity is a powerful means of defining and locating oneself in the world, through the prism of collective personality and its distinctive culture. The interview data suggest that London-based civil society organisations play an important role in both building and reinforcing national identity, amongst both new arrivals and longer-term expatriates, in four key ways:

1. Promoting and consuming ‘New Zealand’ wine and food at organisation functions

In the expatriate context, consumption of New Zealand foods (pavlova, afghan and ANZAC biscuits, lamingtons, lolly cake, pineapple lumps and meat pies) invokes a sense of familiarity and nostalgia for time spent growing up in New Zealand where such foods were commonplace. Interestingly, sometimes such ‘memories’ of home were not necessarily personally experienced but became familiar through their constant representation at New Zealand-focused events overseas! In addition, such routine

symbols of New Zealand were also ambiguous in an overseas context, where strong overlaps in the cultural histories of New Zealand and Australia, in particular, make it difficult to claim that a food like pavlova or the barbecue as purely ‘Kiwi’. Such overlaps were highlighted by the fact that at least three of the organisations had in the past, recently or were about to amalgamate with an Australian branch of the same organisation.

2. Celebrating New Zealand events

Some participants said New Zealand events often had more meaning overseas than at home and facilitated or created memories/remembering in a number of ways. For example, organising New Zealand-focused events helped them to learn about New Zealand’s history and great New Zealanders, while engagement in key national events such as ANZAC Day reinforced common narratives of national identity and patriotism. The 2015 commemoration of the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign had been an

emotional event for some participants, with the mass waiata sung by a large group of New Zealanders from a range of backgrounds a highlight for at least one. Waitangi Day was mentioned less frequently but three participants said their organisations held some kind of event to mark this day. The Rugby World Cup was held in the UK in 2015, with many of the games played in London, and some organisations had been involved in events leading up to this which invoked a sense of national identity, even though some participants were ambivalent about rugby more generally.

3. Bringing New Zealanders together

Civil society organisations such as struggling young musicians in London or the or enhancing linkages between New Zealanders in London. In some cases, these linkages were economic; several organisations actively promoted local businesses selling New Zealand products or owned by New Zealanders, while other participants simply referred to a support network of New Zealanders in London who used their individual connections to help others needing assistance. Some of the organisations had further acted as a conduit for raising funds for New Zealand-focused causes,

such as struggling young musicians in London or the Canterbury earthquakes appeal. Perhaps most important were the social relationships encouraged by the civil society organisations. While some of the younger participants were engaged in the traditional OE practice of sharing accommodation with New Zealanders, others had partnered with non-New Zealanders or otherwise lived outside the ‘expatriate bubble’. Spending time with other New Zealand members of their organisation thus allowed a sense of nostalgia and familiarity not possible with non-New Zealanders.

4. Reinforcing the idea of a ‘New Zealand’ character

Social networks between New Zealanders were facilitated by an enduring belief that there are a set of fairly precise characteristics that define a ‘New Zealander’, particularly in contrast to the British people amongst which expatriates lived. New Zealanders have often expected their country’s strong historical ties with UK to manifest in strong cultural similarities but find the British remarkably different once they arrive. Research identifies common stereotypes of New Zealanders as: innovative and entrepreneurial; hard-working; friendly and approachable; and respectful of other cultural groups. These characteristics are all associat-

ed with the purported egalitarian values evident in New Zealand, at least when compared to the class-based, status hierarchies found in imperial Britain (and arguably today). Participant discussion suggested such values and traits draw New Zealanders together and distinguish them from other nationalities, particularly British peoples. Despite their confidence in talking about ‘Kiwi’ traits and characteristics, some of the participants were aware that commonalities between New Zealand, Australia and South Africa made it difficult to say all were unique to New Zealanders.

Protecting New Zealand’s national reputation

Both New Zealand and New Zealanders are generally well-regarded internationally. This reputation creates pressure to maintain a positive image of New Zealand and participants were motivated to protect New Zealand’s reputation by an extreme pride in their country and its citizens. The most explicit example of expatriates defending New Zealand’s reputation was noted by two participants who had been involved in a delegation that visited a pub where a small number of New Zealanders had been involved in a violent altercation with bar staff. They apologised and gave ‘New Zealand’ gifts, even though they had not been personally involved. More implicitly, participants belonging to the Māori cultural group that performed at many national events helped to protect the New Zealand’s reputation as a world leader regarding biculturalism. Finally, many reinforced New Zealand’s reputation as being ‘friendly’ by being supportive and open-minded in their day-to-day interactions with each other and non-New Zealanders.

Creating a sense of belonging

Two of the Māori participants felt that Māori language and culture was more valued overseas than at home, while three of the four Māori participants said that they felt more at ‘home’ in the civil society organisation to which they belonged in London than they had often felt in New Zealand. This was partly because they felt less constrained by Māori cultural norms and politics and were able to take up leadership roles that would likely have been restricted due to age or gender at home. Examples also suggested that the expatriate experience encouraged non-Māori New Zealanders to interact with Māori and Māori culture in more positive ways than within New Zealand.

Although only the Māori participants explicitly spoke of their expatriate organisation providing a sense of belonging in such ways, two Pākehā participants noted that belonging can be difficult for expatriates returning ‘home’, in part due to frustrations with the much slower pace of life and fewer opportunities, but also because the strong sense of belonging enjoyed with other New Zealanders in an expatriate context was not always replicated in New Zealand.

Linked to this, involvement in a New Zealand-focused organisation in London had offered some participants opportunities not likely to eventuate at home. Several expressed a sense of awe that they had met famous New Zealanders, including senior government officials, artists, musicians and authors. Members of the Māori cultural group also spoke of the frequent opportunities to perform all over Europe, while others had been invited to the ANZAC commemorations at Westminster Abbey and saw the Queen. More significantly, the expatriate experience had allowed two participants to create niche roles that enhanced their careers and gained them a certain social status they thought unlikely to be equalled in New Zealand.