AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND: THE PRICKLY PAIR

Australia and New Zealand have prickly relationship going back about over two centuries. One of the best books on this subject is by Denis McLean The Prickly Pair: Making Nationalism in Australia and New Zealand (University of Otago Press, 2003).

There are many more New Zealanders living in Australia than there are Aborigines. Over one tenth of all New Zealanders (then 450,000 in 2003) now live in Australia. The average New Zealander here enjoys a higher standard of living than the average Australian: he or she is better educated and better paid. (Only about 60,000 Australians live in New Zealand).

Ironically, just over a century ago all New Zealanders were given the chance to live in a greater Australia – and they turned it down. That option still remains in the Australian Constitution. Australia and New Zealand are a "prickly pair".

Britain's James Cook in 1769-1770 sailed the South Pacific looking for a "Great South Land". For centuries Europeans assumed that there must be a giant land mass in the south to balance the giant Europe/Asia land mass in the north. He reported back that there was no giant land mass – just a variety of different sized islands in a huge expanse of water.

The British set about colonizing New South Wales and New Zealand. New South Wales was first because Cook reported that the local people were more pleasant: they were inoffensive and not given to cruelty. The few Maori Cook saw scared him (10 of the crew members on his second voyage in 1774 were killed and eaten by them).

The first reported exchange between New Zealand and Australia took place in 1793. Two Maori chiefs were captured and sent to Norfolk Island to teach the convicts how to make flax. They did not know – flax making was a woman's job. But the trip opened their eyes to the British way of life. They returned home with stories of the new opportunities. Younger Maori then volunteered to serve as crew on ships to Port Jackson. The New Zealand tradition of seeking a better life in Australia therefore began over two centuries ago.

The settlement of New Zealand was greatly helped by the Treaty of Waitangi on February 6 1840, when Maori chiefs agreed to give control over their territory to the British (although there were later very brutal wars between Maori and the settlers). In 1841, New Zealand became a crown colony in its right.

Except for the "boat people" who escaped from New South Wales, New Zealanders are proud that they never received any convicts. New Zealand's European heritage came from settlers who wanted to go to the country. They feel superior to the Australians. Early migration schemes boasted that New Zealand was "another England": a green land and pleasant climate suitable for farming – while Australia was parched and snake-ridden.

Throughout the rest of the 19th century, the Australian colonies and New Zealand each developed in their own ways, like spokes off the London hub. They often ran on separate but parallel tracks. For example, the Australian colonies and New Zealand all tried to restrict Chinese immigration (much to the annoyance of London, which regarded them as good and cheap workers in its colonies).

The most significant national decision New Zealand has ever made was to jump off the bandwagon of Australian federation when it began rolling in a serious way in the 1880s and 1890s. New Zealanders had already developed by this time a sufficient sense of their own separate national identity. The middle class New Zealanders looked down on the working class Australian "mateship" culture. New Zealanders, from small town, small farming communities, did not like the brassy, show-off way that Melbourne and Sydney had developed.

No common sense of identity had emerged. To people outside the region (such as Americans) the people of both countries looked so similar. But the people themselves felt different. Indeed, many Australian colonists were not all that keen on creating one national federation across the continent – let alone one including New Zealand.

Australians campaigning for a national federation gave opportunities to New Zealanders to be represented at their constitutional conferences. But New Zealanders in the 1890s replied that transport across the Tasman was inadequate and they knew as little about Australia as they did Africa. They feared that they did not have the money to keep political representatives based in Australia for months on end.

Meanwhile, there was a movement within New Zealand emphasising the need to remain separate from Australia. They could become "Maorilanders", with a distinctive national culture.

The period of British global ascendancy has stamped them both in vary similar fashion. But it had not forced them into the same mould.

In the 20th century, Australian and New Zealand service personnel served with distinction in Britain's wars. But they were in separate fighting formations.

The Royal Australian Navy was formed in 1911 and it was under Australian (and not British) command. New Zealanders saw their naval destiny as being based on whatever London required. Australia and New Zealand did not try to create a joint South Pacific fleet.

At the decisive World War I naval battle of Jutland in 1916, HMS “New Zealand” was in the battle line. But HMAS “Australia” was not. She had been damaged in night manoeuvres a few days beforehand in a collision – with HMS “New Zealand”.

Overall, the empire’s contribution to the war effort was about one to four. But the member countries did not participate in the decisions of the War Cabinet. The British would consult, but not delegate.

During the rest of the century, Australia and New Zealand continued their separate development – both from Britain and from each other. They wanted to retain their links with Britain but British interests were now elsewhere. London decided in 1973 that it would be better off in the European Economic Community (now European Union).

Australia and New Zealand had to develop different economic ties. In 1900, 91 per cent of New Zealand’s exports went to Britain; in 1950 67 per cent went, and in 1990 only 8 per cent went.

The Australian Constitution retains a provision enabling New Zealand to join the federation if it wants to. There are rapidly improving economic ties. But there are still major cultural differences. As Mike Moore, the former New Zealand prime minister once said: “Always remember, the Australians are our best friends – even if we don’t like them”.

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