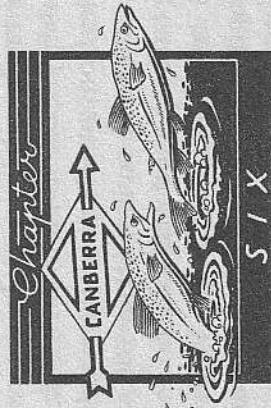


school of Australian archetypes – the one that thinks that any bloke not lucky enough to be born in Australia is tragically ill-favoured by fate and probably has a tiny dick as well, poor bastard.

And he was right, of course – about having places to be, I mean. It was time to move on to Canberra.



I

Before Australia's six colonies federated in 1901, they were, to an almost ludicrous degree, separate. Each issued its own postage stamps, set clocks to its own time, had its own system of taxes and levies. As Geoffrey Blainey notes in *A Shorter History of Australia*, a pub owner in Wodonga, in Victoria, who wished to sell beer brewed in Albury, on the opposite bank of the Murray River in New South Wales, paid as much duty as he did on beer shipped from Europe. Clearly this was madness. So in 1891, the six colonies (plus New Zealand, which nearly joined, but later dropped out) met in Sydney to discuss forming a proper nation, to be known as the Commonwealth of Australia. It took some years to iron everything out, but on 1 January 1901 a new nation was declared.

Because Sydney and Melbourne were so closely matched in terms of pre-eminence, it was agreed in a spirit of

compromise to build a new capital somewhere in the bush. Melbourne, meanwhile, would serve as interim capital.

Years were consumed with squabbles about where the capital should be sited before the selectors eventually settled on an obscure farming community on the edge of the Tidbinbilla Hills in southern New South Wales. It was called Canberra, though the name by then was often anglicized to Canberry. Cold in the winter, blazing hot in the summer, miles from anywhere, it was an unlikely choice of location for a national capital. About 900 square miles of surrounding territory, most of it pastoral and pretty nearly useless, was ceded by New South Wales to form the Australian Capital Territory, a federal zone on the model of America's District of Columbia.

So the young nation had a capital. The next challenge was what to call it, and yet more periods of passion and rancour were consumed with settling the matter. King O'Malley, the American-born politician who was a driving force behind federation, wanted to call the new capital Shakespeare. Other suggested names were Myola, Wheatwoolgold, Emu, Eucalypta, Sydmeladperbisho (the first syllables of the state capitals), Opossum, Gladstone, Thirstyville, Kookaburra, Cromwell and the ringingly ineane Victoria Defendera Defender. In the end, Canberra won more or less by default. At an official ceremony to mark the decision, the wife of the Governor-General stood up before a gathering of dignitaries and, 'in a querulous voice', announced that the winning name was the one that had been in use all along. Unfortunately, no one had thought to brief her, and she mispronounced it, placing the accent emphatically on the middle syllable rather than lightly on the first. Never mind. The young nation had a site for a capital and a name for a capital, and it had taken

them just eleven years since union to get there. At this blistering pace, all being well, they might get a city going within half a century or so. In fact, it would take rather longer.

Although Canberra is now one of the largest cities in the nation and one of the most important planned communities on earth, it remains Australia's greatest obscurity. As national capitals go, it is still not an easy place to get to. It lies forty miles off the main road from Sydney to Melbourne, the Hume Highway, and is similarly spurned by the principal railway lines. Its main road to the south doesn't go anywhere much and the city has no approach at all from the west other than on a dirt track from the little town of Tumut.

In 1996 the Prime Minister, John Howard, caused a stir after his election by declining to live in Canberra. He would, he announced, continue to reside in Sydney and commute to Canberra as duties required. As you can imagine, this caused an uproar among Canberra's citizens, presumably because they hadn't thought of it themselves. What made this particularly interesting is that John Howard is by far the dullest man in Australia. Imagine a very committed funeral home director - someone whose burning ambition from the age of eleven was to be a funeral home director, whose proudest achievement in adulthood was to be elected president of the Queanbeyan and District Funeral Home Directors' Association - then halve his personality and halve it again, and you have pretty well got John Howard. When a man as outstandingly colourless as John Howard turns his nose up at a place you know it must be worth a look. I couldn't wait to see it.

You approach Canberra along a dual carriageway

through rural woodland, which gradually morphs into a slightly more urban boulevard, though still in woodland, until finally you arrive at a zone of well-spaced but significant-looking buildings and you realize that you are there – or as near there as you can get in a place as scattered and vague as Canberra. It's a very strange city, in that it's not really a city at all, but rather an extremely large park with a city hidden in it. It's all lawns and trees and hedges and a big ornamental lake – all very agreeable, just a little unexpected.

I took a room in the Hotel Rex for no other reason than that I happened upon it and had never stayed in a hotel named for a family pet. The Hotel Rex was exactly what you would expect a large hotel built of concrete and called the Rex to be. But I didn't care. I was eager to stretch my legs and gambol about in all that green space. So I checked in, dumped my bags and returned at once to the open air. I'd passed a visitors' centre on the way in, and recollected it as being a short walk away, so I decided to start there. In the event, it was a long way – a very long way, as things in Canberra invariably prove to be.

The visitors' centre was almost ready to close when I got there, and in any case was just an outlet for leaflets and brochures for tourist attractions and places to stay. In a side room was a small cinema showing one of those desperately upbeat promotional films with a title like *Canberra – It's Got It All!* – the ones that boast how you can water ski and shop for an evening gown and have a pizza all in the same day because this place has . . . got it all! You know the kind I mean. But I watched the film happily because the room was air conditioned and it was a pleasure to sit after walking so far.

It was just as well that I didn't require an evening gown

or a pizza or water skiing when I returned to the street because I couldn't find a thing anywhere. My one tip for you if you ever go to Canberra is don't leave your hotel without a good map, a compass, several days' provisions and a mobile phone with the number of a rescue service. I walked for two hours through green, pleasant, endlessly identical neighbourhoods, never entirely confident that I wasn't just going round in a large circle. From time to time I would come to a leafy roundabout with roads radiating off in various directions, each presenting an identical vista of antipodean suburban heaven, and I would venture down the one that looked most likely to take me to civilization only to emerge ten minutes later at another identical roundabout. I never saw another soul on foot or anyone watering a lawn or anything like that. Very occasionally a car would glide past, pausing at each intersection, the driver looking around with a despairing expression that said: 'Now where the fuck is my house?'

I had it in mind that I would find a handsome pub of the type that I had so often enjoyed in Sydney – a place filled with office workers winding down at the end of a long day, so popular at this hour that there would be an overspill of happy people on the pavement. This would be followed by dinner in a neighbourhood bistro of charm and hearty portions. But diversions of this or any other type seemed signally lacking in the sleepy streets of Canberra. Eventually, and abruptly, I turned a corner and was in the central business district. Here at last were stores and restaurants and all the other commercial amenities of a city, but all were closed. Downtown Canberra was primarily a series of plazas wandering between retail premises, and devoid of any sign of life but for a noise of slap and clatter that I recognized after a moment as the

sound of skateboards. Having nothing better to do, I followed the sounds to an open square where half a dozen adolescents, all in backward-facing baseball caps and baggy shorts, were honing their modest and misguided skills on a metal railing. I sat for a minute on a bench and with morbid interest watched them risking compound fractures and severe testicular trauma for the fleeting satisfaction of sliding along a banister for a distance of from zero inches to a couple of feet before being launched by gravity and the impossibility of maintaining balance into space in the direction of an expanse of unyielding pavement. It seemed a remarkably foolish enterprise.

If there is anything more half-witted than asking six adolescents in backward-facing baseball caps for a dining recommendation then it doesn't occur to me just at the moment, but I'm afraid this is what I did now. 'Are you an American?' asked one of the kids in a tone of surprise that I wouldn't necessarily have expected to encounter in a world capital. I allowed that I was.

'There's a McDonald's just around the corner.'

Gently I explained that it was not actually a condition of citizenship that I eat the food of my nation. 'I was thinking of maybe a nice Thai restaurant,' I suggested. They looked at me with that flummoxed, dead-end expression that you have to be fourteen years old to produce with conviction.

'Or perhaps an Indian?' I offered hopefully and got the same no-one-home look. 'Indonesian?' I went on. 'Vietnamese? Lebanese? Greek? Mexican? West Indian? Malaysian?'

As the list grew, they shifted uncomfortably as if fearing

that I was going to hold them individually accountable for the inadequacies of the local culinary scene.

'Italian?' I said.

'There's a Pizza Hut on Lonsdale Street,' piped up one with a look of triumph. 'They do an all-you-can-eat buffet on Tuesdays.'

'Thanks,' I said, realizing this was getting me nowhere, and started to leave, but then turned back. 'It's Friday today,' I pointed out.

'Yeah,' the kid agreed, nodding solemnly. 'They don't do it on Fridays.'

I found my way back to the Rex, but got only as far as the front entrance when I realized that I did not want to dine in my own hotel. It is such a tame and lonely thing to do - an admission that one has no life. As it happened, I had no life, but that wasn't quite the point. Do you know what is the most melancholy part of dining alone in your hotel? It's when they come and take away all the other place settings and wine glasses, as if to say: 'Obviously no one will be joining *you* tonight, so we'll just whip away all these things and seat *you* here facing a pillar, and in a minute we'll bring *you* a very large basket with just one roll in it. Enjoy!'

So I lingered by the entrance of the Rex for the merest moment, then returned to the street. I was on a boulevard built on an important scale, though it had almost no traffic and was mostly lined with darkened office buildings lurking in dense growth. Several hundred yards further on I came to a hotel not unlike the Rex. It contained an Italian restaurant with its own entrance, which was probably as good as I was going to get. I went in and was taken aback to realize that it was full of locals, dressed up as if for an occasion. Something in their familiar manner with the

waiters, and with the surroundings generally, bespoke a more than transient relationship with the place. When locals eat in the restaurant of a big glass and concrete hotel, you know that the community must be in some measure wanting.

The waiter took away all the other place settings, but he brought me six breadsticks – enough to share if I made a friend. It was quite a jolly place with everyone around me getting comprehensively refreshed – the Australians do like a drink, bless them – and the food was outstanding, but it was nonetheless evident that we were dining in a hotel. Canberra has quite a lot of this, as I was to discover – eating and drinking in large, characterless hotels and other neutral spaces, so that you spend much of the time feeling as if you are on some kind of long layover at an extremely spacious international airport.

Afterwards, bloated with pasta, three bottles of Italian lager and all six of the breadsticks (I never did make a friend), I went for another exploratory amble, this time in a slightly contrary direction, certain that somewhere in Canberra there must be a normal pub and possibly a convivial restaurant for the following evening, but I passed nothing and once again found myself eventually on the threshold of the Rex. I looked at my watch. It was only nine thirty in the evening. I wandered into the cocktail lounge, where I ordered a beer and took a seat in a deep-backed chair. The lounge was empty but for a table with three men and a lady at it, getting boisterously merry, and a lone gent hunched over a tumbler at the bar.

I drank my beer and pulled out a small notebook and pen and placed them on the table in front of me in case I was taken with a sudden important observation, then followed that with a book I had bought at a second-hand

bookshop in Sydney. Called *Inside Australia* and published in 1972, it was by the American journalist John Gunther, a name that once towered in the annals of travel journalism but is now, I fear, largely forgotten. It was his last book; it just about had to be as he died while preparing it, poor man.

I opened it to the chapter on Canberra, curious to see what he had to say about the place back then. The Canberra he describes is a small city of 130,000 people with the 'pastoral feeling of a country town' – an easy-going place with few traffic lights, little nightlife, a modest sprinkling of cocktail lounges and about 'half a dozen good' restaurants. In a word, it appeared actually to have gone backwards since 1972. I was proud to see that the Rex Hotel was singled out as a 'stylish address for visitors – always nice to see one's choices validated even when they are nearly thirty years out of date – and that its cocktail bar was adjudged one of the liveliest in the city. I looked up from my book and shrank at the thought that very possibly it still was.

At length I turned to the chapter on Australian politics – my reason for buying the book in the first place. Apart from the scoring of Australian Rules Football and the appeal of a much-esteemed dish called the pie floater (think of something unappetizing and brown floating on top of something unappetizing and green and you pretty well have it) there is nothing in Australian life more complicated and bewildering to the outsider than its politics. I had tried once or twice to wade through books on Australian politics written by Australians, but all these had started from the novel premise that the subject is interesting – a bold position, to be sure, but not a very helpful one – so I was hoping that the detached observations of a

fellow American might be more instructive. Gunther gave it a game stab, I must say, but it was a challenge beyond even his talents for lucid compression. Here, for instance, is just a snippet of his attempt to explain Australia's system of preference voting:

If, after the second-preference votes are added to the first, there is still no candidate with a majority of the total ballots cast, the process is repeated: the ballots of the candidate trailing at this stage of the computation are divided up on the basis of second preference. If he inherited some second preference votes from the first man eliminated, these are now redistributed on the basis of third preference. And so on.

I particularly liked that casual concluding 'And so on.' It's a deft piece of work because it seems to say 'I understand all this perfectly, but I see no need to tax you with the details,' whereas of course what he is really saying is: 'I haven't the faintest idea what any of this means and frankly I don't give two tiny mouse droppings because, as I pen these words, I am sitting in the lounge bar of a bush mausoleum called the Rex Hotel and it's a Friday night and I am half cut and bored out of my mind and now I am going to go and get another drink' The uncanny thing was I knew the feeling exactly.

I glanced at my watch, appalled to realize it was only ten minutes after ten, and ordered another beer, then picked up the notebook and pen and, after a minute's thought, wrote: 'Canberra awfully boring place. Beer cold, though. Then I thought for a bit more and wrote: 'Buy socks.' Then I put the notebook down, but not away, and tried without much success to eavesdrop on the conversation among the

lively foursome across the room. Then I decided to come up with a new slogan for Canberra. First I wrote: 'Canberra - There's Nothing to It!' and then 'Canberra - Why Wait for Death?' Then I thought some more and wrote: 'Canberra - Gateway to Everywhere Else!', which I believe I liked best of all. Then I ordered another beer and drew a little cartoon. It showed two spawning salmon, halfway up a series of lively cascades, resting exhausted in a pool of calm water, when one turns to the other and says: 'Why don't we just stop here and have a wank?' This amused me very much and I put the page in my pocket against the day I learn to draw objects that people can actually recognize. Then I eavesdropped on the people some more, nodding and smiling appreciatively when they appeared to make a quip in the hope that they would see me and invite me over, but they didn't. Then I had another beer.

I think the last beer might have been a mistake because I don't remember much after that other than a sensation of supreme goodwill towards anyone who passed through the room, including a Filipino lady who came in with a Hoover and asked me to lift my legs so that she could clean under my chair. My notes for the evening show only two other entries, both in a slightly unsteady hand. One says: 'Victoria Bitter - why called?? Not bitter at all. But quite nice!!' The other said: 'I tell you, Barry, he was farting sparks!' I believe this was in reference to a colourful Aussie turn of phrase I overheard from the people at the next table rather than to any actual manifestation of flatulence of an electrical nature.

But I could be wrong. I'd had a few.

In the morning I woke to find Canberra puddled under a dull, persistent rain. My plan was to stroll across the main

bridge over Lake Burley Griffin, to a district of museums and government buildings on the other side. It was a rotten morning, a foolish day to be out on foot, made more wretched by the slow-dawning realization, once I had set off from the hotel, that I was embarked on an expedition even more epic than the one the afternoon before. Canberra really is the most amazingly spacious city. On paper it looks quite inviting, with its serpentine lake, leafy avenues and 10,000 acres of parks (for purposes of comparison, Hyde Park in London is 340 acres), but at ground level it is simply a great deal of far-flung greenness, broken at distant intervals by buildings and monuments. It is worth considering how it got this way. In 1911, with the capital site chosen, a competition was held for a design for it, which was won by Walter Burley Griffin of Oak Park, Illinois, a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright. Griffin's design was unquestionably the best, but that doesn't necessarily mean a great deal. Another leading entrant, a Frenchman named Alfred Agache, failed to read the briefing notes carefully, or possibly at all, and placed Parliament and many other important buildings on a flood plain, guaranteeing that legislators would have to spend part of the year treading water while debating. Also, for reasons that can only invite wondered speculation, he placed the municipal sewage works in the very heart of the city, as a kind of centrepiece. Despite these quirky shortcomings, his entry came third. Second prize went to Eliel Saarinen, father of Eero, the man who later persuaded the Opera House judges to choose the bold design of Jørn Utzon. The elder Saarinen's design was perfectly workable, but it had a kind of brutal grandeur about it - a sort of proto-Third Reichish quality - that unsettled the Australian judges.

Griffin's plan, by contrast, was instantly engaging. It

envisioned a garden city of 75,000 people, with tree-lined avenues angling through it and an ornamental lake at its heart. Handsome and confident, majestic but not imperious, it ideally suited the modest yearnings for respectability without fuss that marked the Australian character. Moreover, Griffin had an advanced understanding of the importance of presentation. His submissions were not modest sketches that looked as if they had been scribbled on the back of a cocktail napkin, but a series of large panoramic tableaux, exquisitely drafted on the finest stretched linen. In this he was assisted inestimably - totally, in fact - by his new bride, Marion Mahony Griffin, who was without doubt one of the great architectural artists of this century.

The drawings, all done by Marion, show a silhouetted skyline full of comely shapes - a dome here, a ziggurat there - but with surprisingly little in the way of committing details. They are tantalizing impressions - ethereal, cunningly distant. These are drawings you could gaze at for hours with pleasure, but turn your back for a moment and you cannot remember a thing that was in them, other than a vague sense of a pleasing composition. Although Griffin and his wife had never been to Australia (they worked from topographic maps) the drawings show an almost uncanny affinity for the landscape - an appreciation of its simple uncluttered beauty and big skies that you would swear was based on the closest acquaintanceship. Take nothing away from Walter: he was a gifted, occasionally even inspired, architect; but Marion was the genius of the outfit.

The Griffins had a decidedly bohemian bent - he liked big floppy hats and velvety ties; she had an unfortunate fondness for dancing through woodland glades in

diaphanous gowns, in the manner of Isadora Duncan – and this no doubt counted against them in the rough and ready world of Australian politics in the second decade of the century. In any case, they found little in the way of funds or enthusiasm awaiting them when they arrived in Australia in 1913, and the outbreak of the First World War the following year made both scarcer still. Once on site, Griffin seemed unable to get to grips with things. He had no experience of managing a big project and clearly it did not suit his temperament. By 1920, no work at all had been done beyond a cursory staking out of the main roads. At the end of the year, more or less by mutual agreement, he left the project.

Griffin stayed in Australia another fifteen years and became one of the country's most illustrious architects, but nearly all the buildings he designed either were never built or have since been torn down. Increasingly beset by financial difficulties, he moved to India in 1935. There, in 1937 he contracted peritonitis after falling from some scaffolding and died, aged sixty. He was buried in an unmarked grave. Today almost all that remains from a long and busy career are Newman College at the University of Melbourne, a couple of municipal incinerators, and Canberra – and Canberra isn't really his at all. Only the floor plan, so to speak, is his – the avenues, the roundabouts, the lake that cuts the city in half. The component parts fell to scores of other hands, none working together. An entirely new city was built on his layout, but it has none of the coherence that his design implied. It's really just a scattering of government buildings in a man-made wilderness. Even the lake, which winds a serpentine way between the commercial and parliamentary halves of the city, has a curiously dull, artificial feel. On a sloping

promontory on its wooded north shore was a modestly sized building called the National Capital Exhibition, and I called there first, more in the hope of drying off a little than from any expectation of extending my education significantly.

It was quite busy. In the front entrance, two friendly ladies were seated at a table handing out free visitors' packs – big, bright yellow plastic bags – and these were accepted with expressions of gratitude and rapture by everyone who passed.

'Care for a visitors' pack, sir?' called one of the ladies to me.

'Oh, yes please,' I said, more thrilled than I wish to admit. The visitors' pack was a weighty offering, but on inspection it proved to contain nothing but a mass of brochures – the complete works, it appeared, of the visitors' centre I had visited the day before. The bag was so heavy that it stretched the handles until it was touching the floor. I dragged it around for a while, and then thought to abandon it behind a pot plant. And here's the thing. There wasn't room behind the pot plant for another yellow bag! There must have been ninety of them back there. I looked around and noticed that almost no one in the room still had a plastic bag. I leaned mine against the wall beside the plant and as I straightened up I saw that a man was advancing towards me.

'Is this where the bags go?' he asked gravely.
'Yes, it is,' I replied with equal gravity.

In my momentary capacity as director of internal operations I watched him lean the bag carefully against the wall. Then we stood for a moment together and regarded it judiciously, pleased to have contributed to the important work of moving hundreds of yellow bags from the foyer to a

mustering station in the next room. As we stood, two more people came along. 'Place them just there,' we suggested, almost in unison, and indicated where we were sandbagging the wall. Then we exchanged satisfied nods and moved off into the museum.

The National Capital Exhibition was excellent. These things in Australia generally are. It wasn't a large building, but it gave a good grounding in the history and development of Canberra. What surprised me was how very recent most of it is. Several of the walls had blown-up photographs of Canberra as it was in times past, and most of these were arresting when compared with the present. Lake Burley Griffin,* for instance, wasn't filled until 1964. Before that, for many years, it was just a muddy depression between the two halves of the city. On another wall a pair of matched aerial photographs showed Canberra in 1959 (pop. 39,000) and Canberra now (pop. 330,000). Apart from the addition of a few large buildings in what is known as the Parliamentary Zone and the filling of the lake, what was remarkable was how little changed the city looked.

Thus briefed, I was eager now to see it all with my own eyes, so I left the building and ventured along the wooded lakeside to the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge and set off for the distant and, as it were, official side of the city. The rain had stopped, but Lake Burley Griffin contains an engineering wonder (the wonder being why they bothered) called the Captain Cook Memorial Jet, a plume of water that shoots a couple of hundred feet into the air in a dazzlingly unarresting manner, then catches the prevailing

breeze and drifts in a fine but drenching spray over the bridge and whatever is on it. Sighing, I pushed through it and emerged on the other side into an area of the most extravagantly spacious lawns, punctuated at distant intervals with government buildings and museums, each as remote as objects viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

Even the National Capital Authority, the governing body for the city, admits in a promotional fact sheet that 'many people believe the Parliamentary Zone has an empty and unfinished character, where the vast distances between the institutions and other facilities discourage pedestrian movement and activity.' I'll say. It was like walking around the site of a very large world's fair that had never quite got off the ground.

I called first at the National Library because I wanted to see the *Endeavour Journal*, Captain Cook's famous diary of his voyage. Cook naturally took the journal home with him after his epic trip of discovery, but it was lost soon after his death and remained lost for almost one hundred and fifty years before it turned up unexpectedly at a Sotheby's auction in London in 1923. The Australian government hurriedly bought it for £5,000 (almost double what it was prepared to pay for the design of the city in which it sits) and it is now treated with the sort of reverence we in America reserve for ancient treasures like the Constitution and Nancy Reagan. Unfortunately, as I discovered when I presented myself at the information desk, it isn't out on display, but rather is shown just once a week by appointment.

I stared at the man in dismay. 'But I've travelled eight thousand miles,' I blurted.
'I'm sorry,' he said and seemed to mean it.

* Whoever named the lake evidently didn't realize that Burley was Walter's middle name, not part of his surname.

'I spent a night in the Rex,' I said, thinking surely that would clinch it, but he was powerless to help. He did, however, direct me to a leaflet in which I could see a picture of the journal and encouraged me to have a look round the public galleries. As it happened, these were splendid. One room held paintings showing Australians of note (well, of note to other Australians) and in another was an exhibition of the original drawings for the Sydney Opera House. These included not only Utzon's winning sketches, but the second and third place entries – both radiantly undistinguished. Second place went to a fat cylinder with a harlequin-style pattern in stainless steel. Third place looked like a large supermarket. In a glass case was a wooden model made by Utzon showing that the sails of the Opera House roof were not meant to echo the sailboats in the harbour (an assertion that is made over and over in books and articles, inside Australia and out) but are simply sections of a sphere.

Then it was across another thousand acres of undeveloped veldt to the National Gallery, a surprisingly big museum in a fortress-like building. It was airy and various and generally very good. I was particularly taken with the outback paintings of Arthur Streeton, of whom I had not heard, and with the large collection of Aboriginal paintings, mostly done on curled bark or other natural surfaces and covered in colourful dots and squiggles. It is a fact little noted that the Aborigines have the oldest continuously maintained culture on earth, and their art goes back to the very roots of it. Imagine if there were some people in France who could take you to the caves at Lascaux and explain in detail the significance of the paintings – why this bison is bolting from the herd, what these three wavy lines mean – because it is as fresh and sensible to them as

if it were done yesterday. Well, Aborigines can do that. It is an unparalleled human achievement, scarcely appreciated and I think that is worth a mention here, don't you agree? I had intended to go on to Parliament House, but I emerged from the National Gallery to find that the afternoon was almost gone. I would have to leave that for the next day. I started back down the gentle slope towards the lake and bridge. The skies were clearing at last and on the far-off hills lay patches of silvery light. Now that the clouds had ceased their low-level assault and retired to fluffier heights, the view was really quite fine. Canberra is a city of memorials, most of them fairly grand and nearly all with a private avenue of trees, and from here I could take them in with a single panning motion of my head. It reminded me less of a city – much less – than of, say, a preserved battlefield. There was that sense of spaciousness and respectful greenness that you would expect to find at Gettysburg or Waterloo.

It was impossible to believe that 330,000 people were tucked into that view and it was this thought – startling when it hit me – that made me change my perception of Canberra completely. I had been scorning it for what was in fact its most admirable achievement. This was a place that had, without a twitch of evident stress, multiplied by a factor of ten since the late 1950s and yet was still a park. I imagined some sweet little American community such as Aspen, Colorado, trying to absorb 300,000 additional residents in forty years and thought of the miles of random, carelessly dribbled infrastructure that that would require – the shopping malls and parking lots, the eight-lane roads stretching off into a forest of bright signs and elevated hoardings, the vast graded acres of housing (bye woods! bye, fam!), the distant plazas of supermarkets and

box stores, the tangled ganglia of motels, petrol stations and fast food places. Well, there is virtually none of this in Canberra. What an accomplishment that is. My feeling for the place was transformed entirely.

Still, I must say a decent pub or two wouldn't go amiss.

II

Now here is why you will never understand Australian politics. In 1972, after twenty-three years of rule by the conservative Liberal Party, Australia elected a Labor government under the leadership of the dashing and urbane Gough Whitlam. At once Whitlam's government embarked on a programme of ambitious reforms – it gave Aborigines rights they had not previously enjoyed, began to disengage Australian troops from Vietnam, made university education free, and much more. But, as sometimes happens, the government gradually lost its majority and by 1975 Parliament was in a deadlock from which neither Whitlam nor the leader of the opposition, Malcolm Fraser, would budge.

Into this impasse stepped the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, the Queen's official representative in Australia. Using a reserve privilege not before invoked, he dissolved Whitlam's government, placed Fraser in control and ordered a general election. The outrage and indignation Australians felt at this high-handed interference can scarcely be described. The country was thrown into a fury of resentment. Before they had had any real chance to sort out their differences themselves, an unelected representative of a government on the other side of the planet had taken the matter out of their hands. It was a humiliating

reminder that Australia was still at root a colony, constitutionally subordinate to the United Kingdom.

Nonetheless, as required, the Australians held a general election at which the voters overwhelmingly – overwhelmingly – turned Whitlam out of office and brought in Fraser. In other words, the electorate calmly endorsed the action that had so exercised the nation only a month before.

And that, as I say, is why you will never understand Australian politics.

Part of the problem, of course, is that it is nearly impossible to track Australian politics from abroad because so little news of the country's affairs leaks out into the wider world. But even when you are there and dutifully trying to follow it, you find yourself mired in a density of argument, a complexity of fine points, a skein of tangled relationships and enmities, that thwarts all understanding. Give Australians an issue and they will argue it so passionately and in such detail, from so many angles, with the introduction of so many loosely connected side issues, that it soon becomes impenetrable to the outsider.

At the time of my visit the big national issue was whether Australia was to become a republic – whether it was going to snip its last colonial ties to Britain and take the steps necessary to ensure that no future John Kerr ever similarly humbled the nation again. It seemed to me no issue. Surely any nation would want to have control of its own destiny? You would expect, at the very least, that the decision would be a straightforward one.

Yet for two years to my certain knowledge Australians had been tying themselves in knots over every possible objection to such a change. Who will be the new president under such a system and how can we guarantee that he

never does anything he shouldn't do? What becomes of all those names like 'Royal Australian Air Force' and 'Royal Flying Doctor Service' if we're not actually royal any longer? What words shall we put in the new preamble to the constitution? Shall we refer to the Australian quality of 'mateship' as John Howard would like or shall we recognize that that is a fundamentally vacuous and embarrassing concept? Oh dear, this is awfully complicated. Maybe it would be better if we just left things as they are, and hope the British are good to us.

I don't mean to suggest that these are not important issues, of course. But it is an exhausting process to witness, and you do rather come away with two interlinked impressions - that Australians love to argue for argument's sake and that basically they would rather just leave everything as it is. In the end, of course, they voted against a republic, though at the time of my visit that seemed an extremely unlikely outcome. Yet another reason why outsiders will never understand Australian politics.

On the other hand, and what makes up for a lot, is that Australians have the best and most entertaining parliamentary debates anywhere. American and even British television news coverage would be vastly enlivened if it provided a nightly report from Australia's parliamentary chambers. You wouldn't have to explain what it was all about - it generally surpasses understanding anyway - but just allow the audience to savor the rich thrust and parry of Australian insult.

In his book *Among the Barbarians*, the Australian writer Paul Sheehan records an exchange in Parliament between a man named Wilson Tuckey and the then Prime Minister Paul Keating of which the following is a small part:

Tuckey: 'You are an idiot. You are just a hopeless nong . . .' Keating: 'Shut up! Sit down and shut up, you pig . . . Why do you not shut up, you clown? . . . This man has a criminal intellect . . . this clown continues to interject in perpetuity.'

This was actually a fairly tame exchange for the linguistically versatile Mr Keating. Among the epithets that have taken flight from his tongue during the course of public debate, and are to be found gracing the pages of whatever is the Australian equivalent of *Hansard*, have been *scumbags*, *pieces of criminal garbage, sleazebags, stupid foul-mouthed grubs, piss-ants, mangy maggots, perfumed gigolos, gutless spivs, boxheads, immoral cheats, and stunned mullets*. And that was just to describe his mother. (I'm joking, of course!) Not all parliamentary invective is quite so ripe, but it is nearly all pretty good.

I had watched this sort of thing with the greatest of pleasure during my various Australian visits, so you can imagine the eagerness with which I parked my car in the visitors' area on Parliament Hill the next morning and proceeded across the manicured lawns for a quick look round before moving on to Adelaide.

Parliament House is a new building, which replaced an older, more modest Parliament House in 1988. It is a rather arrestingly horrible edifice, crowned with a ridiculous erection that looks like nothing so much as a very big Christmas-tree stand. On the way in, I stopped beside a large ornamental pool to have a look at the rooftop erection.

'Largest aluminium structure in the southern hemisphere,' declared, with evident pride, a man with a camera around his neck who saw me studying it.

'And are there many other aluminium structures competing for the honour?' I asked before I could stop myself.

The man looked flustered. 'Why, I don't know,' he said. 'But if there are they're smaller.'

I hadn't meant to offend. 'Well, it's certainly very . . . striking,' I offered.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'I think that's the word for it. Striking.'

'How much aluminium is in it?' I asked.

'Oh, I've no idea. But a great deal, you can be sure of that.'

'Enough to wrap a lot of sandwiches!' I suggested brightly.

He looked at me as if I were dangerously stupid. 'I don't know about that,' he said and, after a moment's befuddled hesitation, took his leave.

As it was a Sunday morning, I hadn't expected Parliament House to be open to visitors, but it was. I had to submit to a security inspection and had a small pocket-knife taken away from me and twenty minutes later was sawing away on a scone in the cafeteria with something far more lethal. The whole of Parliament House is rather like that – superficially grave and security-conscious, in keeping with the trappings of an important nation, but at the same time really quite relaxed, as if they know that no international terrorists are going to come storming over the parapets and that visitors are mostly just people like you and me who want to see where it all happens and then have a nice cup of tea and a cautiously flavourful treat in the cafeteria afterwards.

Inside it was much handsomer than the bland exterior had suggested, with a lot of native woods covering the floors and walls. Best of all, you weren't herded round in a group but left to explore on your own. I have never been

in America's Capitol Building, but I dare say they don't just leave you to wander as whimsy takes you. I felt here as if I could go anywhere – that if I had known which was the right door I could have slipped into the Prime Minister's office and scribbled a note on his blotter or perhaps left my salmon cartoon to brighten his day. A couple of times I furtively tried door handles. They were always locked, but no alarms went off and no security people crashed through the windows to smother me with nets and take me away for interrogation. In the areas where security people were posted, they were always friendly and happy to answer any questions. I was very impressed.

Australia's Parliament is divided into two chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate (interesting in a very low-grade sort of way, that they use the British term for the institution and the American terms for the chambers), and both of these were open for inspection from the visitors' galleries. Both were quite small, but handsomer than I had expected. On television the green of the House of Representatives has a decidedly bilious look, as if the members are debating inside someone's pancreas, but in person it was much more tasteful and restrained. The Senate, which I had never seen on television (I believe because the Senators don't actually do anything – though I will check my John Gunther and get back to you on this), was in a restful ochre tone.

In a large upstairs foyer was a gallery containing portraits in oil of all the Prime Ministers, which I toured with interest. I had been doing quite a lot of reading, as you can imagine, so there was a real pleasure – a genuine oh-I've-heard-so-much-about-you quality – in seeing their faces at last. Here was kindly old Ben Chifley, a Labor PM just after the war and so much a man of the people that

when in Canberra he stayed in the modest Kurrajong Hotel at a cost to the taxpayer of just six shillings a day, and could be found each morning strolling in his dressing gown to the communal bathroom to shave and wash with the other guests. Then there was the grand and leonine Robert Menzies, who was Prime Minister for twenty years but thought of himself as 'British to the bootstraps' and dreamed of retiring to a cottage in the English countryside, evidently happy to turn his back on his native soil for ever. And poor old Harold Holt whose fateful plunge into the sea in 1967 earned him my permanent devotion.

It's quite a small club. Since 1901 Australia has had just twenty-four Prime Ministers, and I was startled to realize how many of them remained unfamiliar to me. Of the twenty-four, I counted fourteen of whom I knew essentially nothing, including eight - exactly one third - of whom I had not even heard. These included the festively named Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page, who was, to be fair, Prime Minister for less than a month in 1939, but also William McMahon, who held the office for almost two years in the early 1970s and whose existence was until this moment quite unsuspected by me.

I would have felt worse about this except that only the day before I had read an article in the papers reporting a government study that had found that Australians themselves were essentially as ignorant of these men as I was - that indeed more people in Australia could identify and discuss the achievements of George Washington than could provide similar service for their own first elected head of state, Sir Edmund Barton.

And with that sobering thought to ponder, I left the nation's capital and set off for distant Adelaide.



It is 800 miles from Canberra west to Adelaide, most of it along a lonely, half-forgotten road called the Sturt Highway. The highway was named for Captain Charles Sturt, who explored the region in a series of expeditions between 1828 and 1845. Apart from charting the languid course of the Murray River and its tributaries, Sturt's principal distinction was in being the first of the early explorers to show a measure of competence. He knew, for instance, to secure his horses at night. This might seem a self-evident requirement for anyone hundreds of miles into a desolate void, but it was a skill indifferently applied before him. John Oxley, the leader of a slightly earlier expedition, failed to keep his horses tethered and woke up one morning to find them all gone. He and his men spent five days, mostly on foot, rounding them all up. Soon after, the horses wandered off again. Nonetheless, Oxley is