

MICRONATIONS

NOWHERE

Ben was still in the womb when I visited many of the smaller nations in Australasia. Since there are no scheduled international services between Australia and, for example, United Oceania, Claire had to drive me through no man's land, often at great personal risk. Sort of.

Emperor George Cruikshank II is monarch of all he surveys. Unfortunately, he doesn't survey a great deal, apart from several very nice coffee sets. He points out, however, that his territory is six times larger than it was when he and two cousins founded their empire, Atlantium, in 1981. At first, Atlantium was only ten square metres of land, arbitrarily seceded from Emperor George's mother's house in Narwee, Sydney. Today, it is a one-bedroom flat in Potts Point.

Australia is a world centre for micronations. Of the 200 or so tiny, contested, often imaginary, never recognised 'new countries' in the world, some 20 of them are in (or formerly in) Australia.

On the north side of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Prince Paul of

Wy is monarch of all he surveys — except the area of zoned bushland on which he hopes to construct a driveway. After eleven years of wrangling over the right to have an access road to his home, he seceded from his local council in Mosman in November 2004 and declared a principality on his 700 square metre property. Prince Paul believes he reigns over one of the smallest micronations in Australasia, and was surprised when I told him his territory is ten times greater than that of the mighty empire to the south.

About 200 kilometres north of Sydney — and much the same distance from the Empire of Atlantium and the Principality of Wy — His Serene Highness Prince Peter I rules the Principality of United Oceania with an iron fist inside a gardening glove. The spiritual heart of United Oceania is a 66-hectare block of bushland near the small town of Medowie, on which the prince was refused permission to build a house due to aircraft noise from the nearby RAAF base. He seceded from Australia in May 2003.

‘Prince Leonard of Hutt is, for a large part, responsible for this phenomenon that whenever people have disagreements, they declare independence,’ said Emperor George.

Prince Leonard of Hutt, born Leonard George Casley, famously withdrew his Western Australian wheat farm from the Commonwealth of Australia in 1970, after a dispute with the government over the amount of wheat he was allowed to harvest on his 7486-hectare property. Under his new quota, Casley claimed, it would take him 500 years to sell as much as he had done in the previous 20 years.

He served documents of secession on the state premier, the prime minister and the governor general, but offered Her Majesty the Queen the chance to stay on as head of state. (Few Australasian micronations have ever tried to throw off the monarchy — only the elected government.)

The Prince and his wife Princess Shirley quickly gathered around them quite a large court. Hutt River passports and honours were sold like British passports and honours — to anybody who could afford them. Prince Leonard claims 13,000 citizens all over the world — ‘including your country,’ Prince Leonard told me, meaning Australia.

Although Prince Leonard claims 13,000 citizens all over the world, a passport does not give them all the right to live on his farm, which is currently home to about 30 people, 10,000 sheep, several official buildings, a tea house and a giant statue of Prince Leonard’s head.

Hutt River produces stamps, banknotes and souvenirs and, according to Prince Leonard, attracts 27,000 tourists per year. ‘You should remember it’s the second-largest country in this continent,’ he said.

Prince Leonard claims to have travelled on a Hutt River passport to Europe and the Middle East, but the Australian authorities say that is not possible. I have seen Dutch travellers turned back from the Cambodian border when the guard said, ‘There’s no such country as the Netherlands,’ so it is hard to credit the prince.

On display in Hutt River is a letter of dubious provenance, supposedly leaked from the Department of Territories, which acknowledges Prince Leonard’s claim that he is not subject to Australian laws. More than anything, Prince Leonard’s claim that he does not pay Australian income tax has excited the imagination of micronationalists throughout the continent. The Australian Tax Office will not comment on individual cases, but when I asked Prince Leonard if he actually makes a profit, he said, ‘Er, well, that’s not the question.’

In 1976, Alex Brackstone, a British-born former uranium prospector, postmaster, and — supposedly — circus-monkey trainer,

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reacted to what he saw as the rising tide of Australian republicanism by declaring his 4-hectare farm to be the Province of Bumbunga, with the Queen as head of state in perpetuity.

‘Governor’ Brackstone made a very large map of the British Isles out of 10,000 strawberry plants, with the idea that he would conduct weddings for homesick British couples, who would marry on the strawberry-plant stencil of their home county with soil from that county sprinkled around them. Unfortunately, the Australian Customs Service confiscated the soil he tried to import; then all his strawberry plants were killed in a drought.

Brackstone was last heard of in 1999, when he apparently tried to fend off illegal firearms charges by claiming immunity from prosecution as the head of a foreign state. Shortly afterwards, he returned to the UK.

In 1985, the Empire of Atlantium issued a set of stamps to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of Hutt River Province. Emperor George received an angry phone call from Governor Brackstone, who threatened to take him to court if he tried the same thing with Bumbunga.

‘I directed the prime minister of the time to send [Brackstone] various threats of increasing violence,’ said Emperor George, ‘and there was a state of war declared between the two states. He acknowledged that the state of war existed. We toyed around with the idea of having a ping-pong game, or something, to try to decide the matter.

‘That was probably the closest we ever came to doing something that was just totally ridiculous,’ said Emperor George.

Micronations often are surprisingly belligerent, given their size. Several — including, in 1977, Hutt River — have declared war on Australia, and one would-be state near the UK has actually attacked the Royal Navy. Twice.

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At this point, I must declare a personal interest. In 1998, I invaded Hutt River Province. Well, I did not actually go myself — I had work to finish in the office — but, as the editor of *Ralph* magazine, I had decided Prince Leonard was a traitor to the Crown and deserved to be hanged.

I sent multi-award-winning journalist Paul Toohey and a posse of *Ralph* readers to reclaim Prince Leonard's perfidious principality. They drove six hours from Perth in an Avis Toyota Land Cruiser, poured into the farm and announced they were staging a coup.

'All right,' said Prince Leonard. 'Go right ahead.'

The plan was to storm the post office, tear down the Hutt River standard, and hoist the Australian flag, but Prince Leonard had run out of rope for his flagpole. My crew wanted to tie him to his chair for interrogation. Prince Leonard agreed, provided they let him show two German tourists around Hutt River first.

Back in 1978, when a battle-weary nation was still counting its dead (none) from the previous year's conflict with Hutt River, the government of the Independent Nation of Rainbow Creek in the Victorian Alps declared war on the state of Victoria. There were no casualties on either side.

More recently, in September 2004, the Gay Kingdom declared war on the Commonwealth of Australia.

The Gay Kingdom, based on an archipelago in the Coral Sea, with a land area of 3 square kilometres in 780,000 square kilometres of ocean, was founded in June 2004 by a group of gay businesspeople, who were dismayed at the government's refusal to recognise gay marriage. The Gay Kingdom, ruled by His Majesty Emperor Dale, who claims direct descent from Edward II, the 'murdered gay king of England', pledged to ratify gay union. One week after the Gay Kingdom declared war, it announced a cessation of

hostilities. Like Prince Leonard in 1977, Emperor Dale claimed to be undefeated, and therefore the legitimate sovereign. However, it does not appear that anybody — gay or otherwise — actually lives in the Gay Kingdom.

Among Australian micronations with no apparent territorial claims is the Duchy of Avram, in Tasmania. Avram's founder, who insists the name on his birth certificate is 'The Right Honourable the Earl of Enoch', and who was elected to the Tasmanian parliament as 'His Grace the Most Noble the Duke of Avram', dismisses as 'bullshit' any suggestion he might once have been called 'John Charlton Rudge'.

In the early 1980s, the Duke of Avram founded the Royal Bank of Avram, in Tasmania. Customers who wanted to shop at the Duke's store in Strahan first had to exchange their dollars and cents for avrams and ducals. Press clippings from the time suggest he called his bank a b_nk, so as not to be prosecuted for running an unlicensed bank (there being no law against running an unlicensed b_nk). The Duke denied this; but the government took him to court, anyway. The government lost, and had to return all the currency it had confiscated from him. The Duke now lives in Sorell, and said his duchy is 'philosophical, not territorial'.

Through his Royal College of Heraldry, the Duke awards titles to other would-be nobles. As his website explains, 'Any individual who distinguishes himself may be said to ennoble himself.' He stressed he would not give a title without a coat of arms, and some of his armorial bearings, he told me, pre-date the Knights Templar.

So he didn't just make them up?

'I didn't found any of the orders,' he said. 'I only took them over when my dad died.'

What did his father do?

‘He was the duke before me.’

The record indicates the Duke entered public life as an anti-tax campaigner, rather than as a commercial heraldic authority.

‘No,’ he said.

No?

‘I don’t believe that tax is legal in Australia,’ he said, ‘because Australia doesn’t exist.’

He said the High Court in London decided the British Dominion of the Commonwealth of Australia has been illegal since 1917.

‘I don’t even know where Australia is,’ said the Duke of Avram.

The Duke claims to have two passports — ‘an official one and ordinary one’ — in the name of His Grace the Most Noble the Duke of Avram, but the title is curiously truncated on his driver’s licence, which only has room for 22 characters, and all the banks can fit on his cards is ‘“The Most”, or something’, he said.

‘Avram’ is a Hebrew name; his website calls it Qabalistic (Kabbalistic). I asked the Duke if he was a Kabbalist. He wanted to know what I meant by ‘the Kabbalah’.

Well, it is the sum of a number of mystical texts, I said, written in Aramaic, sometimes held to be pre-Judaic but actually post-Judaic, principal among which is *The Zohar*, composed by a Sephardic Jewish rabbi in the thirteenth century.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I won’t ask *your* religion.’

The Duke said the Kabbalah is a living tradition.

‘When I was in George Town [in Tasmania],’ he said, ‘one of the top Jewish scholars in the world, a rabbi, one of the most renowned in the world . . .’

Who’s that?

‘Oh, it doesn’t matter what his name is. He came to see me in George Town because the, er, Jewish lobby, church, whatever

words you want to use, were shit-scared about what I was preaching.’

The Duke said he teaches Kabbalah and ‘helps people and instructs people in improving their life through the study of it’.

Through the study of *The Zohar*?

‘The Kabbalah, yeah. However you spell it.’

The Kabbalah is a number of texts, of which *The Zohar* is the most important, I suggested.

‘I don’t see it that way,’ he said, and pointed me instead to a paperback by somebody called Carlos Suarez, published in 1970.

Later, the Duke told me he has been initiated as a ‘Jewish high priest’, although he does not seem to be Jewish, Judaism does not have a class of ‘high priests’, and the only initiation I can imagine might be quite painful for an adult male.

Esoteric ideologies seem to resonate with a certain kind of micronationalist. The apparently non-territorial Principality of Camside — which declared war on Australia in 2003 — is the only nation on earth to hold by former British broadcaster David Icke’s revelation that the world is controlled by the Rothschild family, who are really a bunch of giant lizards from space.

The Rigoli family, who claim independence for their 24-hectare Principality of Ponderosa (from which they run their business, Bonanza Pack), near Shepparton, describe Ponderosa as a place where ‘Christians, white Anglo-Saxons and capitalists are not discriminated against’. In 1999, Prince Joseph Rigoli warned the ‘secret purpose’ of the Republic referendum was ‘to replace God as King with the Beast of the New World Order as King’.

Back in 1998 when Paul Toohey and the boys invaded Hutt River, they found a chapel emblazoned with the number ‘666’. Emperor George, who founded Atlantium to promote a ‘liberal, secular, progressive, globalist world view’, said, ‘It’s been pointed

out to me by people who have met Prince Leonard that he actually believes he is some sort of messiah, and Hutt River Province is the early stages of some Kabbalistic world state. If you ask him that directly, he'll deny that — but he's written extensive documents based on theosophical, Kabbalistic traditions.'

I asked Prince Leonard if he, too, is a Kabbalist.

'A capitalist?'

A Kabbalist.

'Ah, Kabbalah, yes.'

Prince Leonard said he had wondered 'whether the spiritual actually exists', so he founded the Royal College of Advanced Research to look into the question. The college discovered 'that the spiritual exists, but that doesn't give you a supernatural God'.

He describes the work of associated researchers as 'even more interesting than the Kabbalah'.

The Empire of Atlantium is one of Australia's few micronations of the left. Emperor George has noted the short lives of other micronations, and is justly proud of Atlantium, which has lasted longer than his second hobby, collecting Art Deco toasters and coffee sets. He conceded that 'for practical purposes' his Potts Point unit is part of Australia.

'It's administered by Sydney City Council, we pay rates and taxes,' he said. 'We look at it like a consulate or an ambassadorial-type residence. However, we do have plans to acquire several hundred acres of rural New South Wales in the next five years.'

The population of Atlantium has exploded with the spread of the internet. Emperor George claims 1000 'members' in 65 countries although, once again, membership of his 'empire of the mind' does not carry the right to move into Emperor George's bedroom.

Atlantium has a 'very active community' in Brazil, where its imperial legatus, or diplomatic representative, has worked as a

consular official for a number of more widely recognised countries, such as Albania, and was invited to the inauguration of President ‘Lula’ da Silva in 2003.

As a representative of Atlantium?

‘Amongst others, yes,’ said Emperor George. ‘Obviously, his Albanian connections probably had a greater influence on the decision than Atlantium.’

Micronations are dreams, and they don’t often come true. His Serene Highness Prince Peter I of United Oceania is a bluff, practical man, a former pool consultant now ‘in business promotional products’. Somewhat disconcertingly, he refers to pregnant Claire, who drove me through Australia to Atlantium, as ‘mummy bear’. His dream is to build a house on land he bought in 2001. It’s a peaceful slice of myrtles and gums, home to roos and a goanna to which Prince Peter sometimes rolls an egg. The Principality of United Oceania has a gate but no fence, and the only structures on the property are a Portaloo and a battered caravan on which vandals have repeatedly painted ‘Fuck U’. Council will not let him build because of noise from the local RAAF base, but Prince Peter commissioned a report from an independent acoustic engineer which, he said, proves he would be directly affected for precisely 2.6 minutes per year.

Council rejected the report, and Prince Peter told them, ‘You don’t even legally exist.’ In fact, he said, no council in Australia legally exists, in part because the Australian constitution only allows for state and federal government.

A 1988 referendum asked if voters wanted ‘to alter the Constitution to recognise local government’. The proposition was rejected in every state by a national majority of 3,084,678 — but all states went on to pass a local government act, anyway.

‘We consider we live in a democracy,’ said Prince Peter. ‘I think the correct term is an oligarchy.’

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Prince Peter had no political motive for secession. 'It was all done to make the council leave me alone,' he said. 'They still send me rates notices, which I send back and tell them they can't rate an independent country.'

When the story of United Oceania become known, said Prince Peter, 'I started getting phone calls from people all over the place, wanting to join.' Their properties did not adjoin his but, he said, 'Look at Alaska compared to America. It's got Canada in between,' and, he points out, there is a bit of the Australian Capital Territory in Jervis Bay.

Now United Oceania claims a larger surface area than Monaco.

'We've actually got water frontage to Port Stephens,' he said, 'which gives us secure and free passage to international waters . . . I had a bloke from Mosman ring me up, wanting to know if he could be the Sydney Embassy. He'd even been to the council and got permission to put up a flagpole.'

Mosman is an unlikely hotbed of secessionist feeling. While Prince Peter's dream is a house, Prince Paul of Wy's dream is a simple driveway. Prince Paul, a former Mosman Citizen of the Year, is anxious to stress he is seceding not from Australia or New South Wales, but only from Mosman Council.

'We're hoping that maybe Manly will take us up,' he said, 'or Botany, or one of the other seaside suburbs that might understand our way of life.'

He may never get his driveway, but, he said, other 'wonderful things' have come out of his secession, 'Like my son going to school, and a boy who'd given him a little bit of trouble came up and said, "David, can I be your bodyguard?"'

'And another little boy wanted to be his horse.'