

# THE DIARY

## HECKLER

### Talking back to the rude

"WHERE are you from?" I am asked this regularly because I have an accent. Everyone has an accent, but mine isn't pure Australian; it has an American component.

What's wrong with being asked where you're from? Primarily, for me, it's boring. After 40 years of the same question, I'd rather talk about something else.

So I answer "I'm from Wollongong", which is true. I've lived in Wollongong since 1986, longer than I've lived anywhere else and longer than all my years in the United States.

But this seldom satisfies my questioners. "But I detect a bit of an accent. Are you from Canada?" Many Australians imagine that Canadians become upset if they are thought to be Americans. At this point I usually admit I'm from the US. But often that is not enough.

"What part of the US?"

I can obfuscate and say from several places (true), or be more precise and say Oklahoma. I lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for 11 years but have not visited the state for the past 40, so it hardly seems like home. All my relatives left decades ago.

Finally, after years of being annoyed by such questions – always well meant, of course – I realised that for some reason it is socially acceptable to question someone about their origins based on their accent, even though commenting on other inferences is off limits.



Imagine being introduced to someone and having the nerve to ask "How old are you?", then, when the person demurs or deflects, persisting: "But I noticed wrinkles around your eyes that make me think you're over 40."

Imagine meeting someone and asking "How much do you weigh?", then, when the person tries to avoid answering, persisting: "But you look like you're over 80 kilos."

Imagine meeting someone and asking "How much money do you make?", then, when the person declines to answer, persisting with comment about the quality of their clothes.

These scenarios are unlikely. It's usually considered impolite to ask strangers their age, weight, income, religion or hair colour, even though you can guess by simple observation.

So why is a stranger's accent fair game? Why is it OK to ask about their origin but not about their weight or age?

I don't know the answer. My main interest is in changing the conversation without being offensive. So far my best response is: "Where are *you* from?" That shifts the focus from me to my conversation partner – far more interesting to me.

Brian Martin

**Readers are invited to send 450 words on what makes their blood boil to heckler@smh.com.au. Include daytime phone details.**