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# 9

## Citizenship

Robert Jovicic was born in France 1966 and came with his Yugoslavian parents to Australia at the age of two. He grew up Australian. His parents became Australian citizens but Jovicic never bothered to do so, because he had permanent migrant status. But it wasn't as permanent as he might have thought. Jovicic became involved in criminal activities. After spending time in jail, he was deported from Australia, to Serbia, where he was unable to work (having been given only a short visa) and didn't know the language.

Jovicic was vulnerable to expulsion from Australia because he lacked citizenship. If his parents had been in Australia when he was born, he could have remained in Australia despite any crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Most people in the world are a citizen of a country; some are citizens of two or more countries. Being a citizen normally means you have the right to reside in a country. Usually you can obtain a passport and travel to other countries.

Citizenship is a key tool used by governments to control populations. If you are not a citizen of any country, you are “stateless” and at risk of being sent somewhere you don't want to go, or even imprisoned.

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<sup>1</sup> After publicity about his desperate plight, Jovicic was able to return to Australia and be granted permanent resident status.

A century or more ago, citizenship was not such a big deal. Relatively few people travelled a lot, but for those who did, there were fewer controls. Passports are a recent invention.

The very idea of citizenship reflects identification with a state, indeed it assumes the existence of states. Without a state, you are a person. When subject to the administration of a state, and accepted as one of its subjects, you are a citizen. As a citizen, you have some rights and privileges not available to those who are not citizens—called aliens. Perhaps it is no coincidence that people from outer space are called aliens. They are not subjects of governments of the planet earth.

The control function of citizenship is most apparent in the plight of refugees. People under threat in their own countries due to war or persecution seek asylum somewhere else, but acceptance is not automatic: they have to be assessed and certified as refugees, and even then they may be kept in camps and prevented from full membership in the receiving country.

Australia illustrates some of the worst practices regarding refugees. Except for Aborigines, the descendants of people who inhabited the continent for tens of thousands of years, nearly everyone in Australia is either a recent immigrant or a descendent of immigrants since the first white settlement in 1788. Despite Australia being a nation of immigrants, recent governments have demonised refugees arriving by boat. They are intercepted by the navy and either pushed back to their port of departure or taken to detention camps in various locations. Those who make it to the Australian continent are also put in camps,

sometimes for years, sometimes with no prospect of release. Many of the refugees are escaping conflicts, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the Australian military is involved. The Australian government wants to fight the enemy abroad but not accept responsibility for the human consequences of the conflicts.

Since the early 1990s, Australian governments have demonised asylum seekers in a populist pitch to xenophobic elements of the population. It is a classic case of building in-group support by treating out-groups as dangerous. Although many Australians have relentlessly campaigned against the government's refugee policy, nevertheless both major political parties have continued with the policy, making it ever more punitive, because they believe this wins voter support.

At the same time, the Australian government has run one of the largest planned immigration programmes in the world, on a per capita basis. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants are accepted each year, mainly in two categories: family reunions—existing family members already reside in Australia—and occupational migrants, who bring skills or money to the country. The result of the ongoing immigration programme is that one out of four Australians was born outside the country, from a range of countries: Britain, New Zealand, China, India, Philippines, etc. The parents of many other Australians were born outside the country, most notably as part of the post-world-war-II wave of immigrants coming from Britain, Italy, Greece, Egypt and elsewhere.

So there is a contradiction at the heart of the Australian government's treatment of immigrants. Those coming

through formal channels are welcomed; those coming by sea as refugees are portrayed as a threat to the country.<sup>2</sup>

Most people prefer living where they are. They have ties to family and friends, cultural associations, local knowledge and many other connections to their community. Most refugees are fleeing violence, exploitation or extreme disadvantage. Most would prefer to stay in their homeland if it could become stable, safe and prosperous.

The “open borders” movement argues in favour of eliminating barriers to people moving to different parts of the world.<sup>3</sup> To most people, this sounds totally impracticable. Millions of people would immediately want to move to the richest countries. But of course a switch to open borders would not happen overnight. Imagine this scenario. In 20 years, barriers to moving between countries would be removed. There would be intense pressure from rich countries to end the conflicts that generate so many refugees—for example in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Syria—to challenge repressive rulers and to implement policies to eliminate corruption and enable people to make a decent living through honest labour. Taking these steps would dramatically reduce incentives to move to other countries. They would also reduce internal migration, a serious problem in many countries.

Ending conflicts, promoting responsive government, eliminating corruption and promoting prosperity are

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2 Other contradictions in the treatment of immigrants are covered in chapter 11, “Trade deals and tax havens.”

3 <http://openborders.info>; Teresa Hayter, *Open Borders: The Case Against Immigration Controls* (London: Pluto, 2000).

exactly the supposed goals of world development, but there is little pressure on rich countries to push in these directions. Indeed, many major conflicts are either initiated by western governments (think Afghanistan and Iraq, among others) or simply ignored (Congo, Burundi, among others). Rich-country economic policies have served to exploit poor peoples of the world, through a range of measures, while massive corruption undermines prospects for economic improvement.

For the moment, the idea of open borders is a utopian vision that can serve to stimulate thinking and direct action towards a different sort of world, one in which controls over poor people are replaced by controls over exploitative practices. The idea of open borders is also useful when thinking about tactics concerning citizenship that serve the state—or challenge it.

### **Promoting country loyalty via citizenship**

Let me start with the perspective that citizenship can serve state elites by encouraging people to identify with *their* country and state. What methods are used to do this? The first is exposure of citizenship itself. This mainly occurs by a contrast with non-citizens. Probably the majority of people in most countries never even think of citizenship as it applies to themselves: they simply take it for granted. It becomes to their consciousness only when outsiders—immigrants or refugees—seek citizenship. It also enters awareness when travelling to areas where passports and visas are required. In some countries, citizenship must be verified before being able to vote or undertake certain

jobs. In filling out forms, you may have to indicate your citizenship.

The second promotion tactic is valuing. Many people may take their citizenship for granted or treat it in a purely pragmatic manner, as a necessity for getting around, something like packing suitable clothes for a trip or obtaining a trade qualification in order to get a job. However, for others, citizenship is a matter of great pride. Governments foster this for new citizens, in special ceremonies. More generally, patriotism is commonly intertwined with valuing citizenship, as a symbol of a connection legitimised by government. Furthermore, many people may come to think of citizenship as an achievement or highly desirable attribute, as something special about themselves, rather than as an arbitrary designation that is created and administered by governments.

The third promotion tactic is explanation or, in other words, giving reasons for citizenship. Among legal scholars, the rationales for citizenship are discussed, but for the general public, there is little discussion of citizenship as a system. Instead, most commentary is about who gets to be a citizen, who is excluded and the justifications for different treatment. For example, the Australian government justifies its immigration programme mainly in terms of the national interest, with two main groups: business immigrants, who bring cash and business skills, and family reunions. There are various debates about these, and complaints about abuses of the system, but seldom any questioning of citizenship as a system of controlling movement.

The fourth promotion tactic is endorsement. Governments give their official support to citizenship arrangements, with various formal processes associated with them: employment restrictions on non-citizens, issuing of passports, citizenship ceremonies, and the various patriotic events and rhetoric. Citizenship is a key means of demarcating an in-group, citizens of a country, from an out-group, everyone else.

The fifth promotion tactic is rewards. Being a citizen has quite a few advantages, depending on the country, for example being able to come and go, have jobs, receive welfare benefits and undertake lower cost education. Most people born in a country and who remain in it take these advantages for granted, but for others, gaining the benefits of citizenship is a major issue, especially for those without a lot of money, education and connections.

In summary, citizenship is one of the elements of the complex of practices and ideas that cement many people's identification with a country. This means in practice association with the country's government, because the government sets and administers the rules for citizenship, in accordance (usually) with international agreements between governments. Citizenship serves to control people's movements in a world where travel is easier than ever before and where restraints on the movement of capital have been dramatically reduced.

Citizenship thus is caught in the middle of some deep contradictions. Governments are committed to the system of citizenship because it gives them power, but it also is a potent trigger for suspicion and even anger at out-groups, including non-citizens who engage in commerce, for

example buying property or selling goods in competition with locals.

### **Alternatives to citizenship**

Quite a few people don't really care about citizenship. If you were born a citizen and never travel anywhere requiring a passport, being a citizen may not seem important. Others treat citizenship as a pragmatic matter, something necessary to get a job and move around, and have no particular attachment to the country or countries of which they are citizens.

Then there are a few people who envisage something different. They might prefer to think of themselves as a citizen of the world, a "global citizen," with primary loyalty to all humans, or perhaps the biosphere or the planet, including everything from air to rocks. The implications of an alternative model of citizenship can be a matter for discussion. Does this mean freedom to move to any part of the world? Or could a person only settle in an area if invited by local residents? What about services now provided by governments, such as unemployment payments? Does global citizenship imply dissolution of governments, or only that governments have to adapt to free movement of citizens?

One possibility would be to look at the arrangements within the European Union, which allow free movement, without passport controls. The New Zealand and Australian governments have removed restrictions on movement between the two countries. Could such arrangements be gradually expanded to more parts of the world?

For the purposes here of looking at tactics, it can be useful to look at a particular alternative. However, alternatives to citizenship are so far off the mainstream agenda that it is not necessary to specify details. There is virtually no public discussion of alternatives to the conventional model of citizenship. For those with money and skills, there is considerable mobility, and citizenship is not a rigid restraint. For those fleeing wars, exploitation, discrimination or poverty, the citizenship system is a barrier to finding a safe haven. It is for this latter group that public discussion of alternatives is hardly ever discussed as a serious option. So the first tactic against alternatives is a *de facto* cover-up.

Next is denigration of alternatives. To the extent that the idea of open borders is even acknowledged, it is usually dismissed as unrealistic if not dangerous. More revealing, though, is attitudes towards those seeking to move to other countries but not welcome by governments. Legitimately, they can be called asylum seekers or refugees, or migrants seeking a better life. They are also given derogatory labels. In Australia, people who attempt to arrive by boat seeking asylum are commonly called illegals, even though what they are doing is legal according to international law. They are called queue-jumpers, even though there is no queue for seeking asylum. They are called economic migrants (often with a contemptuous tone of voice), suggesting they have no justification to migrate, even though other sorts of economic migrants, who have more education, money and connections, are welcome. Sometimes, it is even suggested that asylum seekers are criminals or terrorists.

Because alternatives are not on the agenda, there is not much public discussion of them. If open borders entered the public debate, then undoubtedly arguments would be raised against the possibility, but for the moment the discussions remain among academics. Similarly, there seems to be little need to take action to dampen enthusiasm for open borders through formal investigations or intimidation of proponents. In Australia, the dominant discourse is driven by policies on refugees. Opponents of the government's policies typically argue in terms of international agreements concerning human rights, not in terms of alternatives to citizenship.

### **Challenging the citizenship-patriotism connection**

Because citizenship is so often taken for granted, a first step in challenging usual assumptions is to point out contradictions in the uses of citizenship, for example the different way the rich and poor are treated.

One of the key flash points in citizenship struggles involves responses to immigrants: people seeking to change their residence and sometimes their citizenship. In quite a few countries, governments put tight constraints on acceptance of "unwelcome" immigrants. Pushing for fair treatment of asylum seekers is an attempt to ensure that international agreements are followed. There are many campaigners involved in supporting the rights of refugees.

However, there is another side to the issue: governments pushing for free movement of capital and the selection movement of labour to serve corporate agendas. Highly skilled or wealthy individuals receive a welcome seldom extended to asylum seekers arriving outside the

usual protocols. Questioning the free flow of capital can buy into a nationalist agenda. It is not so obvious whether or how this challenges the systems of citizenship and patriotism.

### **Rethink**

It seems like there are two categories of citizenship, or perhaps two categories of citizens. People who have plenty of money and connections experience no barriers to travel and to being able to live in other countries for short or longer times. These are people who have the mobility of capital: barriers have been removed, so they have various options for deploying their labour. Call this category P, for privileged or professional.

People in the second category have insufficient money, skills or connections to move to more desirable parts of the world. This category includes refugees. It also includes people who are tied to land (farmers), to family networks (through obligations) and to local sets of institutions. People in the second category have limited mobility; the cost in trying to move can be enormous, both financial and associational. Call this category R, for residential or restricted.

There seem to be different ways of thinking about these two categories of people. P-people are welcome, at least in some places, whereas R-people are unwelcome except in special circumstances. Governments typically welcome P-people but create barriers to R-people.

For P-people, citizenship becomes a secondary matter, because it does little to restrict movement or work. For R-people, citizenship is a crucial form of control.

Nearly all the scare-mongering about immigration and refugees is about mobilising concern by local R-people against R-people from elsewhere.

### **Double standards**

The use of citizenship as a method of control contains an intrinsic double standard. First is the standard applied to those without money, skills and connections. They are citizens of their own country, but have little prospect of gaining citizenship in another country, except through enormous efforts and sometimes extreme sacrifice.

For many governments, these sorts of people are undesired as potential immigrants. Furthermore, many citizens identify with their governments and see the poor people of the world as undesirable intruders, who should stay where they are. This fear of foreigners is often linked to racism. It has become almost an inevitable accompaniment to nationalism and country-centredness. Politicians can promote this sort of xenophobia as a means of building support, and because of the level of popular support for measures against these sorts of immigrants, some politicians fear to move too far in other directions.

However, there is another group of people: those with money, skills and connections. For many practical purposes, they are free to move to other countries for visits, jobs and permanent residence. Though how easily they can do this depends on the person and the country, billionaires usually have more options than millionaires.

## **Conclusion**

Citizenship is a crucial element of the way the world is divided into countries, each administered by a government. If you're a citizen, you're part of a recognised unit—a country. If you're not a citizen, you're called “stateless” and are much more vulnerable to ill treatment. Hence there is a great incentive to be or become a citizen, thus reinforcing everyday nationalism and the governments that benefit from it.