

AUSTRALIA: AN INTRODUCTION

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Australia is the only nation occupying a whole continent. It is one of the oldest land masses, the flattest continent, and (after Antarctica) the driest. Australia is the sixth largest country in area (after Russia, Canada, China, the United States and Brazil), yet it has a population of only around 18 million. Vast areas are arid or semi-desert, unsuitable for settlement.

Australia's original inhabitants are the Aboriginal people. It is uncertain when they began living on the Australian continent but authorities say it is probably 50,000 to 60,000 years ago. Some say it may be as long as 100,000 years.

The first European settlement took place little more than 200 years ago. Since then, Australia has developed into a recognised world trader which makes significant contributions to global developments and international affairs. Australia is committed to a democratic system of government and a multicultural society.

Australia is a land of beauty, yet it knows the harshness of bushfire, flood and drought. It experiences the temperature extremes of tropics and snow-capped mountains, and although it is home to deserts, its plains support efficient agricultural industries. Australia is well known for the warmth of its welcome to overseas visitors and the relaxed informality of its people.

Land

Australia's land mass is 7,682,300km². About one-third is desert or semi-desert, or is used for a variety of non-agricultural purposes, such as national parks, forestry, mining and urban areas. Less than 10 per cent of the remainder is used for crops or improved pastures. The average elevation is less

than 300m (compared with the world mean of 700m), and the highest mountain is Mount Kosciusko (2228m).

Nearly a third of the continent lies in the tropics, and the rest is in the temperate zone. The coldest regions are in the highlands and tablelands of Tasmania and the south-eastern corner of the mainland. Summer is from December to February, autumn (fall) from March to May, winter from June to August, and spring from September to November.

Flora and fauna

Australia's geographic isolation has produced a unique flora and fauna. Wildflowers turn the arid and savannah grasslands into carpets of colour after rain. Among these are the waratah, flannel flower, desert pea, Christmas bush and kangaroo paw. Native forests are limited mainly to wetter coastal districts. Rainforests are now largely confined to Queensland. Common native trees are the gum tree (eucalyptus) with about 500 species, and the wattle (acacia) with 600 species.

Australia is the land of marsupials - mammals that carry their young in pouches. The best known are the kangaroo and the koala. There are about 230 species of native mammals, 300 of lizard, 140 of snake, six of marine turtle and two of crocodile. Birdlife is colourful and plentiful, with about 800 species. The largest bird is the flightless emu.

History

Australia's original inhabitants, the Aborigines, developed complex nomadic

hunter-gatherer cultures with rich oral traditions, rituals and ceremonies and associated highly abstract art forms.

European discovery of Australia was a by-product of 16-17th century trade expansion into Asia by Portugal, Spain and Holland. In 1606, the Spanish navigator Luis Vaez de Torres sailed through the strait separating Australia and Papua New Guinea. In the same year, a Dutch ship at Cape York made the first authenticated landing by a European on the Australian continent. In 1642, Dutchman Abel Tasman discovered Tasmania, which he named Van Diemen's Land.

Captain James Cook, of the British Royal Navy, on 20 April 1770 made the first sighting of the east coast of Australia by a European. Nine days later he landed at an inlet which he named Botany Bay after the rich variety of botanical specimens his party collected in the area.

After the American War of Independence, Britain looked for new penal settlements to replace the north Atlantic colonies. In May 1787, a fleet of 11 ships sailed from England under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip, who became the first Governor of the colony of New South Wales. The fleet reached Botany Bay on 18 January 1788, with 736 convicts among the 1530 people on board. Eight days later the settlement was re-established a few kilometres north at Port Jackson, where there was better soil and fresh water. Today, this is the site of Sydney - Australia's largest city.

In 1803, a settlement was established at Hobart in Tasmania. Others followed: on the Brisbane River (Queensland) in 1824, the Swan River (Western Australia) in 1829, at Port Phillip Bay (Victoria) in 1835, and the Gulf St

Vincent (South Australia) in 1836. Transportation of convicts from Britain to New South Wales ended in 1840 and to Tasmania in 1853, but continued in Western Australia until 1868. In the 1850s, migration was boosted by the arrival of free settlers seeking riches on the goldfields or a living from the land.

Population growth and economic expansion prompted the colonies to call for self-government. On 1 January 1901 the six colonies joined in a federation of states to become the Commonwealth of Australia.

The first 30 years of federation were marked by new laws which put Australia in the forefront of social welfare legislation and saw further development of manufacturing industry.

In international relations, the Commonwealth developed towards independent nationhood. Relationships with Britain and the rest of Europe, and with the United States, are important factors in Australia's history and present policies. The nation is now a middle-level power with a particular interest in the Asia-Pacific region.

People

Australia now has a population of some 18 million, more than double the 1945 figure.

Australia's lifestyle reflects its mainly western origins. However, Australia is also a multicultural society which has been enriched by nearly five million settlers from almost 200 nations. Four out of 10 Australians are migrants or

the first-generation children of migrants, half of them from non-English-speaking backgrounds. About eight per cent of Australians have parents who were both born overseas. In 1993, South-East Asia contributed 20 per cent of settler arrivals and North East Asia 13 per cent.

Two out of three Australians live in major urban areas. Couples have an average of two children, and about 78 per cent are buying or have paid for their own home. Men are likely to be employed in manufacturing, wholesale or retail trade, or service industries. More than 42 per cent of the workforce is female. The Australian woman has a life expectancy of 80, and a man, on average, lives to about 75.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people total nearly 1.5 per cent of the population. Two-thirds of the indigenous people live in towns and cities. Many others live in rural and remote areas. Some still have a broadly traditional way of life. Government legislation and policies are aimed at rectifying the disadvantages suffered as a group by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The policies are based on a recognition of the right of indigenous Australians to determine their own future - a policy of self-determination of which economic independence is the cornerstone.

Australia has a tradition of religious tolerance. About three-quarters of Australians are Christians. Of these, one-third each are Roman Catholic or Anglican. Many other faiths followed include Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist.

Immigration

About 70 000 settlers arrived in 1993-94 under Australia's non-discrimina-

tory immigration policy. The policy allows entry for permanent residence of people with:

- close family ties in Australia;
- capital and business expertise;
- skills, qualifications and abilities in particular demand; and
- refugee and humanitarian needs.

Refugees

Australia plays a major role in resettlement of, or assistance to, refugees around the world.

It has a long-standing commitment to help people who are fleeing persecution. More than 500,000 refugees and displaced people settled in Australia between 1945 and 1994.

International Relations

Australia's foreign policy can be broadly characterised as middle power diplomacy with an Asia-Pacific orientation. Its national interests can be divided into three groups:

- geopolitical and strategic interests;
- economic and trade interests; and
- responsible international citizenship.

- The priorities include:
- consolidating Australia's integration into the Asia-Pacific region: especially by further developing regional economic cooperation and trade and investment liberalisation through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process, by pursuit of bilateral trade expansion strategies, and by further building Australia's official trade and diplomatic presence in the region;
- contributing to continuing global trade liberalisation: especially through the reinforcement of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, and support for institutions and measures designed to avoid the formation of warring trade blocs;
- strengthening the Asia-Pacific regional security environment;
- supporting a strengthened and more effective United Nations;
- supporting the application of universal human rights and democratic principles; and
- maintaining a strong commitment to overseas development assistance.

Overseas aid program

Australia's development cooperation program is administered by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB). The objective of the program is to promote ecologically sustainable development in developing countries.

The program, worth over \$1486 million per year, is primarily focused on the Asia-Pacific region, it concentrates on sectors of Australian expertise including education, agriculture and infrastructure development.

Defence

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) implements Government policy, based on self-reliance in accordance with financial, industrial, technological and human resources. The ADF consists of the Army, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Its total permanent force is almost 59,000, of whom 45 per cent serve in the Army, 30 per cent in the Air Force and 25 per cent in the Navy. Most positions are open to women. Civilian support staff total about 21,000, and there are about 28,000 reserve personnel.

Government

Australia's political institutions and practices follow the western democratic tradition reflecting British and North American experience.

Australia has a three-tier (federal, state, and local) system of government. At the federal level is the Australian Parliament (the legislature) and Government, responsible for all matters of national interest. The Parliament is situated in Canberra, the national capital.

At state level are six governments and their legislatures, and the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, are structured similarly. Local governments comprise some 900 elected city, municipal and shire bodies.

Federal parliamentary powers are defined in the Australian Constitution, which came into force at federation, on 1 January 1901. All parliaments except those of Queensland, the ACT and the Northern Territory have two chambers. The Australian Parliament comprises the House of Representatives (Lower House) and the Senate (Upper House). Government is modelled on the Westminster system, with a Cabinet as the major policy-making agency. Legal effect is given to Cabinet decisions by the Executive Council, a formal body presided over by the Governor-General, who represents (with six state governors) Queen Elizabeth II, formally Queen of Australia.

Political parties

Four main political parties are represented in the Australian Parliament: the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party, the National Party of Australia and the Australian Democrats. All are federal in character, with state divisions or branches and a federal executive and conference.

Legal system

Australia's system of law was inherited from the British system and resembles it closely. Several important differences exist, however, mainly because Australia has a written constitution and a federal form of government.

Each of the states and territories has its own court system, and a federal system exists to deal mainly with matters over which the federal parliament has jurisdiction.

Under the Australian Constitution, the judicial power of the federal Govern-

ment is vested in the High Court of Australia and any other courts the federal Government creates. The High Court is the apex of the Australian judicial system and may deal with federal and state matters. It has original jurisdiction in the interpretation of the Constitution and the determination of legal disputes between the Federal Government and state governments, suits between state governments and suits between citizens from different states. It is the final court of appeal.

Law enforcement is dealt with by federal, state and territory police forces. Each force is an independent body, but all cooperate closely with one another. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) is the Federal Government's primary law enforcement agency.

Economy

Australia has developed a mature, diverse economy of which 80 per cent is in the services sector. Many structural changes were introduced in the 1980s.

Rapid expansion of secondary industry, diversification and overall economic growth occurred in the past 50 years, and there was also massive investment in export-oriented mining and energy projects. During the 1980s, Australia's export base was diversified considerably, with the fastest growth in manufactured products and in services. However, even though rural and mining sectors now account for a small part of Australian production, they nevertheless account for about 59 per cent of total exports.

The services sector accounts for 80 per cent of production and 80 per cent of employment.

Manufacturing accounts for 15.9 per cent of production, employing one worker in every seven. Products range from fashion garments to food, electronics to household appliances, base metals to precision instruments, and oil refining to plastics. The manufacturing sector is increasingly sophisticated and technology-based. Exports of manufactured goods have grown at an average rate of 13 per cent a year since 1987 - nearly three times the average OECD rate.

About 41 per cent of Australia's exports to South-East Asia are manufactured goods. Australia sells more to the ASEAN countries than to either the US or the EC. Australia is the 17th-largest supplier of manufactured goods to Japan - ahead of Belgium, Ireland and India.

Australia leads the world in wool production and is a major supplier of wheat, meat and sugar. Australia is also one of the world's largest coal exporters and a major supplier of iron ore, gold, bauxite and alumina.

The value of exports and imports in calendar year 1993 placed Australia 20th as a world trader. Australia trades with about 200 countries and territories and exports almost 300 million tonnes of freight a year.

In the financial year 1993-94, total exports were valued at \$64 652 million, an increase of 6.5 per cent over the previous year. Figures for imports were \$64 470 million, an increase of 8.2 per cent.

Science and technology

Australian scientists and researchers make significant contributions to inter-

national knowledge and development. They are responsible for many advances in manufacturing, mining, agricultural and high technology industries. Medical teams have attracted world interest in research into immunology, cancer treatment and in-vitro techniques. Australia is pioneering alternative energy sources, particularly solar power.

Technology advances include development of an internationally accepted aircraft landing system, a heart pacemaker, a bionic ear, and computer hardware and software. Significant advances have been made in water research, specialised surgery, veterinary medicine and nuclear-waste disposal.

Employing about 7000 people, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) is the major national science agency. Other government research agencies are the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO), the Australian Institute of Marine Science, and the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO). Universities, research institutes and industry also undertake major research programs.

Industrial relations

Australia's workforce averages about 8 million, or 63 per cent of the civilian population aged 15 or older. About 51 per cent of employees belong to a trade union.

Workers have minimum pay and conditions of employment prescribed in legal awards and workplace or enterprise agreements as ratified by federal and state industrial relations tribunals.

The principal tribunal is the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is the national peak body of trade unions and all major unions are affiliated.

Bodies representing business and employer interests include the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), the Business Council of Australia (BCA), and the Metal Trades Industry Association (MTIA).

There is a trend away from centralised wage fixing by the industrial relations tribunals to workplace and enterprise bargaining, between workers, their unions and employers. Under these agreements pay and conditions are tied to such factors as productivity, multi-skilling, and education and training.

The standard working week is 38 hours, usually from Monday to Friday. Higher rates, known as penalty rates, are often paid to workers for irregular or weekend hours. However, workplace and enterprise bargaining has often resulted in flexible working hours and the incorporation of penalty rates in overall pay rates.

Australian workers generally receive four weeks' paid annual leave, and many are paid a leave bonus or loading of 17.5-25 per cent. Employers are also required to make a minimum level of superannuation contributions on behalf of their employees.

Taxation and banking

Taxes are levied without duplication at federal, state and local government levels. Employers deduct income tax from earnings (the pay-as-you-earn

system). Adjustments are made after the close of the financial year (30 June). Australian residents with overseas incomes are assessed, but not double taxed.

The Reserve Bank of Australia is the central bank, and there are more than 30 commercial groups. The national fiscal structure has undergone considerable change since the Government deregulated financial markets and floated the exchange rate in the 1980s. Almost all borrowing, lending and interest controls on the banking system have been removed. A number of foreign banks operate under licence in Australia, some in joint venture with local partners. In the past 10 years foreign investment guidelines have been liberalised.

Communications

Long distances and sparse population present major challenges to the development of efficient communications networks.

The transport system includes nearly 850,000km of roads, 240,000km of unduplicated air routes and 40,000km of government railways.

Postal and telecommunications services, set up by the Federal Government, are maintained through a number of agencies. Telstra Corporation is the world's seventh largest investor in, and user of, the communications satellite INTELSAT. Optus Communications has been introduced as a competitor to Telstra through the privatisation of the national satellite carrier, AUSSAT Pty Ltd.

Australia Post is an Australian Government business enterprise which provides letter and parcel post and a range of associated postal services.

Way of life

Australians have traditionally enjoyed an affluent way of life, with access to a wide range of services and facilities:

Social security: The Federal Government provides pensions for the old, the severely disabled, and sole parents; benefits for the unemployed who are seeking work and those temporarily unable to work because of illness; and allowances for families with children.

Education: States and Territories are responsible for providing educational services, with supplementary funding coming from the Federal Government. Schooling is compulsory until the age of 15 or 16 (varies between states). About 72 per cent of school children are educated in government schools. There are more than 2.2 million children at government schools and around another 870,000 in the private system. Australia has 42 higher education institutions with about 345,000 full-time students, and over 240,000 in part-time and external studies.

Health: Australia's public health services are two-tiered: private medical practitioners provide primary care and hospital systems (public and private) provide comprehensive services. A universal health insurance scheme, Medicare, gives Australian residents protection against hospital costs (excluding private patients), and medical and eye care. This is partly funded by a levy on taxable incomes.

Short-stay visitors to Australia must pay for all medical and hospital treatment; private insurance is available. Visitors from countries with reciprocal health care agreements (Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK) are covered by Medicare. Foreign students in Australia on sponsored studies also have cover, but those paying full fees must pay an advance premium.

Housing: Owner-occupation of domestic housing is high - about 70 per cent. The most popular type is the three-bedroom single-floor home on a separate block of land, although there is a steady move towards higher-density housing.

Environment: Australians are now increasingly involved in environmental issues and nearly half a million people are active in conservation groups. All spheres of Australian government share responsibility for the environment.

The arts: Many aspects of the arts have their roots in European traditions, but the Australian environment, Aboriginal culture, history, and cultural influences from Asia have contributed to the emergence of a distinct Australian cultural identity.

Media: Australia has a thriving media scene, with newspaper readership among the world's highest relative to population. Specialist media outlets reflect minority and ethnic groups.

Tourism: Australia's climate, its geographical and cultural diversity, its safety and its friendly people have made the country a popular international tourist destination. Tourism is one of the biggest industries, representing 5.6 per

cent of the gross domestic product. All visitors must have visas and passports, valid for three months longer than the intended stay. New Zealanders require only a valid passport.

Sport: Australians are great lovers of sport as participants and spectators alike. There is a wide variety of accessible recreational and competitive sport. Almost half the population is registered as sports participants, while many more take part informally. There are more than 100 national sporting organisations and thousands at state, regional and local club level, many with modern purpose-built facilities. Australia is one of only three nations to have competed at every modern Olympic Games, and has taken part in all 14 Commonwealth Games.

Source: DFAT