

Saying thanks to two places I call home

Standing here atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Sydney, Australia, I think I must be stark staring mad! With this view, this beautiful city, this glorious weather, how could anyone leave this place?!

Still, as amazing as Sydney is, Winnipeg won me over eight years ago – its lifestyle, sense of community and accessibility, the cultural diversity, the arts and the seasons, the mix of old and new landscapes, and the multitude of possibilities and opportunities. Winnipeg is truly a ‘people’ city, very welcoming, very natural, and easy to call home.

So, I ask myself, if Winnipeg – and for that matter, Canada – is so fantastic, why have I not yet taken out Canadian citizenship? My life is there, my future, and I am involved in the community. But citizenship? Well, that’s something completely different.

It’s not that I don’t want to, but there is one major complicating factor. The Australian Government doesn’t allow Australians living and working abroad to hold dual citizenship. If I take out Canadian citizenship, I lose my Australian one. And while that doesn’t mean I would no longer be Australian, I just can’t do it.

I suppose it might be difficult for life-long Canadians to understand why someone who comes to their country to live, work and play would not want to go all the way and unconditionally embrace Canadian citizenship. Indeed, I am almost there. As a permanent resident, I can work, pay taxes (and bills), and come and go as I please. And while I can revel in all the good fortune and friendship that Canada offers me, I can’t vote and I can’t call myself a Canadian – two things that would make me proud and official.

So why have I not taken the plunge? Put simply, it just doesn’t feel right to forgo my Australian citizenship. Australia is who and what I am, and I need to simultaneously acknowledge that, as well as the country that now encourages me to go even further. I want to be an ambassador for Australia and Canada and to give something back, to enrich both countries, as well as my family and friends, through my work, achievements, experience, energy, vision and passion.

All I ask in return is for both countries to be proud of me and to respect my absolute inability to choose between them.

And how can I choose? I get emotional during their national anthems, cheer for all their athletes, honour their special days, expound incessantly on their values, thrive on their successes, question their failures, and am deeply grateful for the life they continue to offer me. Indeed, the two places often blend into one, connecting my past with my future and firmly positioning me in the present.

Unofficially, I am about as dual as you can get. And the good news is that it will soon be official.

To the joy of many expatriate Aussies, the Australian Government is finally relenting to considerable pressure to repeal Section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*, which forbids dual citizenship. Once given Royal Assent, this will open the door for Australians who want to retain their citizenship alongside that of their adopted country. Some of us have been waiting a long time for this opportunity and can hardly wait to take advantage of it.

In the meantime, I am doing my bit to teach people in each country about each other, showing them places that will inspire them, fill them with awe, and help them understand and share in the love I feel for my homeland and my new land.

At the moment, my partner is with me in Australia, in the city where I grew up, standing here atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It's his first trip down under and is a great excuse for me to play tour guide in my own backyard. And my five young nieces and nephews here probably already know more about Winnipeg and Canada than any Aussie kid their age. My dream is one day to take them to my other home, to enhance their knowledge, put it all at their fingertips, and show them why experiencing more than their own backyard is both exhilarating and imperative.

I cannot deny or ignore the strong connection I feel to both countries and I certainly cannot trade one for the other. Every time I come back here to Australia, I bring something of Canada with me, and vice versa. What better reason to be a citizen of both countries.

Anyway, as soon as I get down from this Bridge, I'm going back to Winnipeg to become an Aussie-Canadian – my way of saying 'thank you' to the two places I call home.

Jenny Gates is a Winnipeg writer who thinks best atop international icons.

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