

Why can't Australia and New Zealand have a down-under 'Schengen Agreement'?

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I recently undertook a business trip which entailed visiting seven different cities across Europe in ten days. When I first saw the itinerary, one of my initial reactions was exasperation at the number of times I would have to pass through airport security (a ritual which, as long-standing readers of my columns will know, I regard as almost entirely pointless and unnecessary) and present my passport for multiple inspections.

However, once actually in Europe I was reminded of the existence of something called the Schengen Agreement, which since the late 1990s has provided that travel between EU member countries (other than Britain and Ireland, which have 'opted out'), and between them and Switzerland and Norway, is free of any internal border controls.

What this means in practice is that, when you first arrive in a country which is a member of the Schengen zone – on my recent trip, at Zurich in Switzerland – you have to present your passport for inspection just like you would on arriving in Australia from overseas; but that on any subsequent flight to another Schengen zone member - which on my trip was the Czech Republic – it is for all practical purposes a domestic flight. You still have to go through 'security', of course, and you have to show some form of ID to board the flight. But you don't have to go through immigration in order to get out of the country; you don't have to fill in any kind of arrival card; you don't have to line up to get your passport inspected and stamped when you arrive at your destination; and you don't have to go through customs or quarantine.

The same is true of travel between Britain and Ireland, as I discovered on my last holiday when we spent two weeks in Ireland (among other things seeing what a surplus of housing actually looks like – something which we don't have here in Australia).

Although Britain and Ireland aren't part of the Schengen Zone, flights between them are treated as domestic flights, enabling passengers to avoid all the usual hassles with which Australians passing through Heathrow are so familiar.

I was more recently reminded of all of this when I attended a lunch in Sydney addressed by New Zealand's Finance Minister (Treasurer), Bill English. Mr English began his presentation by observing that no two sovereign nations were as closely integrated as Australia and New Zealand. It is indeed undeniable that Australia and New Zealand have achieved a great deal of integration in many important respects; and that business and individuals on both sides of the Tasman, and both national economies, are significantly better off as a result.

But there is one important respect in which Australia and New Zealand are no more integrated with each other than they are with, say, Britain – namely, travel between them. Well, almost: at least we let each others' citizens line up with our own, rather than making them queue up with all the other foreigners (as the British do to both of us, notwithstanding our ongoing loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen and our willingness to preserve the British flag in the corner of ours – both of which count for precisely nothing at Heathrow).

Otherwise, however, it's the same as traveling to any other country – you have to go through immigration before leaving Australia; (and provide more detail in writing about where you are going and why than you do in order to exit any other country that I've ever been to); you fill in an arrivals card and line up to present your passport on arrival in New Zealand; and after having done that you then go through customs and quarantine inspections.

Why can't travelling between, say, Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane and Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch be as simple as travelling between Australian capital cities?

I actually put this question to Mr English at the lunch last month. As I suspected it might have been, his answer was that the Australian authorities posed a greater obstacle to achieving the goal of hassle-free trans-Tasman travel than the New Zealand authorities.

What's hard to understand is *why* that should be so. After all, New Zealanders and Australians have for many years been free to travel to and work in each others' countries – so it's not as if applying the full panoply of border controls is designed to prevent citizens of either country from moving freely from one to the other. Presumably it is rather to stop 'unauthorized foreigners' from entering one country via the other.

But if the Germans can trust the French to stop 'undesirables' from entering Germany through France (and vice versa), and all of the EU bar Britain and Ireland can trust the Italians to prevent 'undesirables' from entering the Schengen zone via what Winston Churchill once called 'the soft underbelly of Europe', surely we should be able to trust New Zealanders to stop 'undesirables' from entering Australia through New Zealand (and vice versa). And if there really are good reasons why we can't at present, then let's work with New Zealand to make whatever changes need to be made so that we can.

Otherwise, as I suggested to Mr English, perhaps New Zealand could just do it unilaterally, and shame us into following them.