

“Almost Like Us”: The American Socialization of Australian Converts

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A FEW YEARS AGO I listened to a group of American missionaries who had just eaten an enormous meal at our table and were showing their appreciation by telling us how backward Australia is in every conceivable way when compared to the Promised Land. After a while I pondered aloud, wondering what I had done wrong in the preexistence to miss out on the blessing of being born American. Earnestly they reassured me, “Oh, no, Sister Newton. You must have been one of the strong ones. You’d have to be, to stand it.”

“To be born British is to win first prize in the lottery of life,” wrote Cecil Rhodes in the heyday of Empire. Today Americans might paraphrase that: to be born American is to win first prize in the lottery of life. Even this hyperbole falls short of epitomizing the inbuilt belief of many American Latter-day Saints, who, deep down, see their American birth and heritage not as luck but most definitely as the reward of preexistent virtue. Although official leadership rhetoric has changed and thoughtful American members recognize the international mission of the Church, these attitudes have not yet been internalized by many General Authorities, general board members, and rank-and-file American Latter-day Saints. Fourteen years after a path-breaking BYU symposium on the problems of the expanding Church and in spite of numerous journal articles and curriculum lessons addressing the sub-

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ject, it appears to me that many American Mormons still have no real conviction that Zion is where the stakes are. Zion is still assumed to be only in North America and, specifically, in Utah.

I was fortunate—or unfortunate—to be able to spend July 1987 in Utah on my way home from a shining week at the Mormon History Association conference in Oxford and Liverpool. After the welcoming, loving, and egalitarian spirit of those MHA meetings, it came as a distinct shock to go to sacrament meeting each Sunday to worship the Lord and find, instead, congregations worshipping America. The Fourth of July, the approaching bicentennial of the American constitution, Pioneer Day—for five weeks I sat in sacrament meetings and listened to sermons and testimonies that celebrated America and the blessing of being American. I was taught that America the place is choice above all other places, that America the political nation is greater than all other nations, that America the economic society is better than all other societies, and that Americans are favoured and blessed of the Lord above all other people.

The corollaries were plain to see. My country is inferior in every way, and the Lord does not love me and my family and my fellow Australians as much as he loves Americans. The Apostle Paul was a victim of mistranslation, and his great outreaching words in Ephesians 2:13 and 19 should really read, “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made [almost] nigh by the blood of Christ. . . . Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but [second-class] citizens with the saints, and [servants] of the household of God.” July 1987 probably wasn’t the best time for a second-class citizen to visit the capital of the kingdom, but the attitudes I observed then are deeply entrenched. Most American Mormon missionaries have been indoctrinated with these ideas from babyhood, and we who are not American-born sometimes wonder whether there is any point at all in our Church membership if we begin the journey with such a handicap.

No Latter-day Saint would argue with the premise that America is a choice land, a promised land. Problems arise when American Latter-day Saints assume that America is the *only* choice land; that because the gospel was restored in America, American culture is also better than any other; and that, therefore, the Church has a mission not only to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ but to spread the gospel of Americanism. It is a modern version of taking up the white man’s burden, and some Church leaders are pleased with the success achieved. In a comment on the state of the Church in Australia offered to an LDS academic in the early 1980s for inclusion in a forthcoming book, one General Authority praised the Church’s development in Australia: “The

Church looks like the Church and the priesthood leaders look like leaders that you would find here [in Utah] or any place else." Why, he might have said, they are almost like us. Sensitive, the historian did not include the statement in his published work.¹

Many of those who have written on the internationalization of the Church assume that culture conflict dates from the mid-1950s, but it is older than that. It has simply become more obtrusive as the Church's great expansion in South America and Asia has made the problem more visible to more people. The international mission of the Church began in 1837, not 1950, even if its purpose at that early date was, as has been argued, selective rather than universal conversion (McMurrin 1979, 9). That there were few culture conflicts in the nineteenth century was the fortunate (or providential) result of historical timing, which found missionaries less indoctrinated with Americanism than those a century later and converts who accepted a change of nationality along with a change of religion (Seshachari 1980, 118).

Until Utah received statehood in 1896, its relations with the federal government were uneasy at best and near-war at worst. As well, many of the missionaries who went overseas in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were either foreign-born converts returning to preach in their native lands, or the sons of such converts, and were still influenced more by their own native culture than by American culture. Utah was still, relatively, a frontier society. Consequently, the missionaries seemed remarkably free of any tendency to make unfavourable comparisons and, indeed, their journal entries often show them admiring rather than denigrating the western societies and cultures that they penetrated. There were no standardized auxiliary programs, no lesson manuals, and no internationally circulated journals except the *Millennial Star*, which came from Britain anyway.

Problems began in the early decades of this century as the gathering lessened and auxiliary programs became standardized. The retreat from polygamy brought statehood, respectability, prosperity, and middle-class values to Utah. By the 1920s the first missionaries born in the post-polygamy era were going into the overseas mission fields; they were the first generation of missionaries to be self-consciously American as well as Mormon. In Australia, in historical collision with the arrival of these missionaries came the growth of nationalism, which was born when the six former British colonies federated in 1901, was fostered by the rampantly nationalistic *Bulletin* (an influential weekly

¹ Copy given to present writer by the author concerned. Names of the author and the General Authority withheld.

journal published in Sydney), and matured overnight on the beaches of Gallipoli in 1915. In many ways, the Church seemed more foreign in Australia then, and was less accepted because of its American image, than in later decades when movies, television, and mass international air travel began to make American culture and institutions more familiar to Australians. As American culture began to permeate the larger Australian society, the cultural differences between the two societies became less striking in the Church context but never unimportant.

The dissemination in Australia of Mormon Americanism as an adjunct to American Mormonism, then, began in the 1920s, accelerated in the 1930s with the missionaries teaching baseball and basketball along with baptism and tithing (Annual Report 1938; MH), and reached its peak in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

In the residue of goodwill from the Coral Sea Battle, things American rode an unprecedented crest of popularity in Australia. The missionaries, always beloved, returned after World War II as confident young American ambassadors and the mission presidents and their wives were benevolent American dictators. They frequently insisted that lesson manuals should be followed verbatim, and the Primary, Sunday School, and Mutual curriculum years began in September because that is when the American academic year began. Consequently, our children were taught about "fall" in our spring and about spring in the autumn. They celebrated George Washington's birthday, Halloween, Pioneer Day, and Thanksgiving. Our Sunbeams were taught to be thankful for the snow they had never seen, and our Junior Gleaners were taught how to behave at the "proms" their all-girl high schools didn't have. We sang "Utah, We Love Thee" and "Our Mountain Home So Dear." We were grateful for our new chapels in the 1950s, even if they did give us furnaces instead of air conditioners, basketball courts instead of cricket pitches, and flat roofs that flooded the classrooms in every tropical storm.

By the mid-1960s the residue of wartime goodwill to Americans in Australia was fast dissipating. Anti-Vietnam demonstrations may not have had the support of a majority of the population, but a certain amount of disenchantment with America was evident in most sectors of the Australian community. The organization of the first Australian stakes coincided with increasing hostility to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war. A steadily growing resentment of specifically American, rather than gospel, content of Church programs began to be voiced, though few Australian Latter-day Saints made any conscious connection between this resentment and community attitudes to the Vietnam War.

Australian Saints recognize and appreciate that the Brethren have tried to deal with the problems. The lesson manuals have been free of explicitly American material for some years now. With the rest of the Church, we now follow a calendar year in our auxiliary programs. However, many Australian Latter-day Saints feel that much of the program and many of the policies are still formulated by Wasatch Front leaders for Wasatch Front wards. The Church is still largely seen as an American church in Australia by public, press, and members.

Women who served on the first Sydney Stake YWMIA board still remember with wry amusement the general board member who visited Sydney in the early 1960s and asked for a report on "Light the Way to MIA." When the local women indicated that they were not promoting this program, the visitor became very agitated and insisted that they must follow the prophet's direction: this program had come by revelation. The Australians finally gave up trying to explain that with one stake covering a sprawling city of a thousand square miles, not one of the forty or so girls of Mutual age lived close enough to a chapel to walk to MIA, let alone pass any other member's lighted porch on the way.

General Authorities and general board members have made hundreds of visits to Australia in the thirty years since that episode, and no fewer than twelve General Authorities have now lived in Australia for varying periods. We thought there would be no further "Light the Way to MIA" problems, but just a few years ago the First Presidency sent bishops a letter urging them to list and visit all the nonmembers living within their ward boundaries. There are from ninety thousand to one hundred thousand nonmembers in each of the thirty-three Sydney wards. Allowing four nonmembers per household and eight visits each week, my bishop would need fifty-four years to make one visit to each nonmember family in our ward. I know of a ward in Salt Lake City with three non-LDS families in the ward boundaries. I wonder which ward the First Presidency had in mind when they signed that letter?

There are many other policies, procedures, and publications that tell us the message hasn't got through yet. The new hymn book recognizes the international Church, we are told—the compilers left out "Utah, We Love Thee." They also kindly retained, for the British Commonwealth, "God Save the King." No matter that we haven't had a king for nearly forty years and that we aren't expecting to have one yet awhile (Edward VIII's abdication was an aberration, not the norm). Every time we fill in our address on a Church form, or even subscribe to *DIALOGUE*, we are reminded that only U.S. members really count:

there's never a space for country.² A few years ago, full-time missions were cut by six months because the falling American dollar was causing hardship for American missionaries and their families. What are we to think when the American dollar recovers and mission calls are again for two years? The American dollar, of course, only recovers in relation to foreign currency. The hardship is there for our missionaries in inverse proportion.

While the twelfth article of faith and section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants justify Australians in honouring the Queen as their head of state, for fifty years, to my knowledge, individual American missionaries in Australia have preached American republicanism as the Lord's will. Consequently, it is not unknown for Australian members to believe that as faithful Latter-day Saints they should be active republicans. They are not the only Australian Latter-day Saints to espouse the republican cause, but their reasons for doing so are questionable. Likewise, most General Authorities visiting at election times carefully refrain from taking a position on the mistaken assumption that Australia's main party choices are analogous to those in America. On the other hand, one or two have uttered careful cautions about "liberal" parties, not realizing that Australia's Liberal Party is its conservative party and the Other Party is the one composed of the dreaded "small l" liberals. Not a few unthinking Australians subsequently voted for the socialist party, quite content that they were doing what "the Church" wanted.

As an Australian, I respect the Australian constitution, which was modelled on the best of both the British and American constitutions. As a member of the British Commonwealth, I am also grateful for my heritage from the British constitution, which, although largely unwritten, is nevertheless the oldest and in many ways the grandest of them all. I was somewhat disconcerted to open my copy of the September 1987 *Ensign*, the official Church journal for all the English-speaking world, and find as the leading article a message from the Prophet titled, "The Constitution—A Glorious Standard"—*the* Constitution, as if there is only one constitution worthy of the name. I agree with Joseph Smith, whom President Benson was quoting, that the constitution of the United States was and is a glorious standard to the world, and had the article been headed, "The *American* Constitution—A

² This results in some really odd addresses. For example, Australians who complete Family Registry forms find their addresses eventually published on the microfiche with a fifth digit carefully added to our four-digit Australian postcode number and the designation "USA" following the name of their Australian state.

Editors' note: DIALOGUE has since corrected this oversight in its mailing practices.

Glorious Standard," I would have no quarrel with it; but to me the assumptions of the heading that appeared are that either I am expected to recognize only the American constitution or that the *Ensign* is really only for American members.

Just a few months ago, an irate father showed me a page his child brought home from Primary—a sharing time activity from the November 1989 *Friend* with pictures illustrating our blessings. Prominent among six-year-old Natalie's supposed blessings is a picture of the American flag. How difficult would it have been to print the outline of a flag and allow children around the world to fill in the symbols of their own country?

These instances are merely symptoms of deeper attitudes. When the *Church News* (or *This Week in Utah* as it is known to the underground and irreverent in Australia) tells us that the purpose of the Tabernacle Choir is to promote "the American family and the American dream" (25 March 1989, 7); when a mission president warns his elders not to become involved with Australian girls, not because their missionary work might suffer but because they might end up *living* in Australia and, horror of horrors, might even lose their American citizenship; when American missionaries in the Australia Perth mission wear p-day tee shirts emblazoned, "I Know I'm Going to the Celestial Kingdom—I've Been to Hell Already," we are getting the message all over again that the Church is not really meant for us, that at best we are still only fringe dwellers in the kingdom.

Perhaps none of this has been particularly damaging to the Church in Australia. It has not even been unanimously resisted; many Australian members and leaders do not see any problem at all, and some have told me that they would never question the American aspects of various programs because they feel that whatever comes from Salt Lake City is the Lord's will. Others, usually but not always women, wholeheartedly embrace Americanism and adopt an American accent at baptism along with the title of "sister" or "brother." A few Australians have been heard to object to the use of Australian sealers in the Sydney Temple because "it just doesn't sound the same as when an American says it." One Australian bishop holds annual Fourth of July socials and November Thanksgiving dinners, although Australia Day and Anzac Day are never mentioned in his ward. Some of his ward members support him, some object openly, and others object privately but will not voice their objections for fear of criticizing the Lord's anointed.

Nevertheless, even if no actual harm has been done to anything but the patriotic feelings of some Australian members, the real point is that the Church has surely progressed more slowly and been less effec-

tive in Australia than it might have been. With more sensitivity and with a deliberate attempt to identify the differences between Australians and Americans and to not only allow but encourage changes in presentation to cater to these differences, missionary, priesthood, and auxiliary programs would be more acceptable and, hence, more successful in Australia.

Americans and Australians are both predominantly from Anglo-Saxon stock and have a common heritage of English language and law. Both countries have accepted large numbers of immigrants and both have a frontier tradition. Because there are major cultural differences between, for example, Japanese and Americans, Church leaders are quickly alerted to the need for program adaptation in Japan. Because only minor differences exist between Australians and Americans, no adaptation is seen as necessary by American Church leaders and often not by Australian Church leaders either. As a result, such leaders are frequently disappointed and puzzled because Church programs don't work as well in Australia as they do in the United States.

American businessman George Renwick makes some relevant points in his sociological discussion of Australians and North Americans. "If the points on which two peoples differ the most are not salient to either, there will be little conflict," he says. "If the points of greatest contrast between them happen to be very salient to one or another of the peoples, even if the number of such points is few, they may go to war." Americans and Australians, he asserts, happen to differ on a few highly significant points. "Chronic aggravation," says Renwick, "results when the disruptive differences are felt but not specifically located, labelled and dealt with" (1980, 2).

Australians, says Renwick, are more egalitarian than Americans. In Australia, Jack really is as good as his master in most situations, though there have always been enclaves of class distinction. Single passengers still automatically sit beside the taxi driver. The custom of tipping for personal service is growing but is generally regarded as un-Australian. Little deference is shown to bosses and managers, and informality is the norm. Australians are deeply and traditionally anti-authoritarian, a legacy of their British, urban, working-class origins and of convictism. Leadership respect must be earned by the incumbent; it is never automatically given because of the office held. Not only do Australians not defer to those who stand out, they actively "knock" them (the "tall poppy" syndrome, a phenomenon they recognize and occasionally deplore in themselves). Australians dislike hierarchies and reporting and being told what to do and have an innate contempt for protocol, fuss, and unnecessary work and procedure (Renwick 1980). Sadly, all these things are becoming more and more

a part of the corporate Church. While not everyone would go so far as to call the Church "solely an American artifact, an international corporation" (Jones 1987, 65), most would agree that the Church has adopted the corporate model with emphasis on the institution and an ever more-powerful bureaucracy (Reynolds 1978, 16; Molen 1986, 34; Jones 1987, 66).

Because of the levelling tendencies in Australian society, Australians dislike elites and even closed groups. Many find it hard to accept the principle of high priests' group socials or leadership luncheons with visiting General Authorities. Matthew Cowley, who ate sandwiches between conference sessions while he talked to anyone around, is still a much-loved legend among older members. Because of the deeply entrenched bush ethos and the legend of "mateship,"³ Australians are fiercely loyal to friends and resent imposed relationships, a characteristic that undoubtedly contributes to the dismal record of home and visiting teaching in most Australian wards.

A major but largely unrecognized problem is the language difference between Australians and Americans. Australian film producer Fred Schepisi went so far as to suggest that Australian directors should subtitle their movies for American audiences. "It's almost a curse we have the same language," he has said. "It deludes us about you guys and you about us" (in Renwick 1980, epigraph). Different usage of the English language reflects deeper cultural differences. Australians are uncomfortable with American enthusiasm. Australians prefer understatement and frequently react with cynicism to the American ability and habit of expressing feelings of love and appreciation. Most Australians are much less articulate about personal beliefs and deep emotions than Americans, a trait that spells disaster for the many Sunday School, Relief Society, and youth lessons that call for class members to express their feelings about topics such as sin, repentance, love, or marriage. Australians are much less willing than Americans to share personal experiences, goals, and aspirations with other class members. British reticence is still deeply ingrained in most Australians.

While Church leaders in the 1970s seemed to visualize a kind of pluralism—"The Church is not an American church except in

³ Although Australia is, and always has been, a highly urbanized society, most Australians (except post-World War II immigrants) have a romantic image of the typical Australian male as a lean, laconic bushman, a skillful stockman or drover living with his workmates in equality and fellowship. (Paul Hogan caricatured this image in *Crocodile Dundee*.) Because of the severe hardships of life in the Australian bush (the outback), bush workers were—and are—very dependent upon the loyalty and help of their workmates. The legend of mateship and this bush ethos persist and still permeate Australian society.

America. . . . In Canada it is a Canadian church; in Australia it's an Australian Church; and in Great Britain it is a British church" (Smith 1971, 2)—leadership rhetoric and official lesson manuals in the 1980s have moved towards an ideal of universalism for the Church. In practice, universalism seems unattainable, and the result is an anaemic Americanism. Just as it is now accepted that historical objectivity is an unrealistic ideal, it can be postulated that it is impossible for American General Authorities to preach worthwhile sermons or for general board members to write purposeful lesson manuals that are totally uninfluenced by their own cultural background. It is equally impossible for lessons and sermons to be meaningful when they are totally divorced from the receiving members' cultural milieu. A Roman Catholic-style pluralism, as discussed by Sterling McMurrin (1979) and others (Seshachari 1980, 119), may prove inevitable. Yet many, with valid reasons, fear a second great apostasy in such an evolution of the Church.

The problem is not an easy one to resolve. Individual American leaders living and working in Australia almost invariably win the love and deep admiration of the members. Even those Australians who wish to see more Australian leadership at every level find a deep ambivalence between their personal feelings for the American leaders and the principle of "Australianizing" the Church in order to meet local needs.

It is by no means certain that even an all-Australian area presidency would solve the problem. As the Church becomes more corporate-like, the leaders who are called to stake, regional, and area positions are almost inevitably those who conform to the corporate image and who do not question the status quo; who probably will not risk negative judgments on their leadership ability by reporting problems; and who, not wanting to imply criticism of the Church or the leaders above them, will be reluctant to say that a program is not working. In a Church where obedience to presiding authorities is obligatory, leaders understandably hesitate to initiate changes. While, in theory, permission to make adaptations has been given (Larsen 1974) most Australian priesthood leaders are unaware of this permission, and even the area presidency seems hesitant to allow changes to authorized programs, which are generally accepted as inspired and therefore in no need of alteration. In the real situation, hopeful comments such as Noel B. Reynolds's, "It is possible that as inspired local leaders accept more of the responsibility for formulating programs and courses of instruction, this problem may gradually fade away" (1978, 16) seem incredibly naive.

It is also becoming increasingly difficult to identify Australian needs as the ethnic mix of the Australian population changes. In one stake in Sydney, members of Samoan, Tongan, and Latin American wards outnumber the active Australian members. In an ironic twist to the situation, these congregations are resisting stake programs, which they see as imposing Australian cultural values on them. In addition, while Australian culture is remarkably homogeneous, needs and conditions in Port Hedland and Perth and in Adelaide and Alice Springs are still different from those in Sydney and Melbourne.

Although the Australian Mission was not officially opened until 1851, 1990 marked the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the first Latter-day Saint missionary "down under." After a century and a half, the Church in Australia now has the potential to become a significant force in Australian society. Surely it is time that cultural problems were recognized and admitted. When both Australian and American Latter-day Saints are willing to do this, the next step will be to commit ourselves, together, to finding ways of preserving the unique message and structure of the restored Church while promoting its growth by capitalizing on Australia's own cultural heritage. Until this is done, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will retain its American image in Australia and will remain what it presently is—a peripheral, semi-alien presence uneasily astride two cultures, no longer wholly American but by no means identifiably Australian.

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