

My kingdom for an access driveway, says Prince Paul

Mini-states are popping up all over, down under

■ AUSTRALIA

Nick Squires in Sydney

You won't find them on any Australian map, but in the minds of their creators at least, they are as real as Liechtenstein or Monaco.

As Australia wrestles with the issue of whether to become a republic, it faces constitutional challenges of its own, from a growing number of mini-states declaring unilateral independence.

The bizarre trend started in 1970 when a West Australian wheat farmer, Leonard Casley, announced his property's secession from the rest of the country as a protest over unfair grain quotas, proclaiming himself Prince Leonard of Hut River Province.

Prince Leonard and his wife, Princess Shirley, continue to run their tiny principality, issuing passports, visas and stamps and welcoming thousands of tourists.

Boosted by the internet, the micro state movement is now going through a resurgence, with around 20 self-proclaimed "nations" gov-

erned by an eccentric collection of monarchs.

Undeterred by the fact their declarations of secession have no legal basis, they have made Australia a world centre for miniature nationhood.

Some are motivated by ideology, others by a grudge against local authorities or a reluctance to pay taxes.

"There's a long tradition in Australia, born of our convict heritage, of showing disrespect for authority," said His Imperial Majesty George II, also known as George Cruikshank, a sales manager from Sydney. "We tend not to take the government too seriously."

Irrelevant they may be, but despite Australia's gradual slide towards republicanism, most of the micro states have pledged allegiance to the British Crown.

Mr Cruikshank, 38, has set himself up as the emperor of Atlantium, a kingdom which consists of his one-bedroom apartment in the harbour-side suburb of Potts Point.

He founded Atlantium with his two teenage cousins in 1981 on a vaguely left-wing agenda of global social and economic reform.

Atlantium now claims nearly 1,000 "subjects" from Azerbaijan to Peru, people who have paid a modest fee to be sent an Atlantium pas-

port and a government charter. Emperor George has a silk sash, a number of medals and two large flags in Atlantium's official livery of orange, yellow and blue.

On the north side of Sydney Harbour, a businessman who calls himself Prince Paul of Wy seceded from his local council in November after 11 years of asking for permission to build an access driveway to his home.

Dissatisfaction with the local authority was also what drove Peter Gillies, aka His Serene Highness Prince Peter I, to declare in 2003 his small block of bushland near Port Stephens, New South Wales, the Principality of United Oceania.

The Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea is founded on altogether loftier principles.

The kingdom, which consists of a handful of tiny coral islands scattered over 780,000 sq km of ocean off the coast of Queensland, is billed as a "homeland" for gays and lesbians.

While some mini-states come and go, Hut River Province will this year celebrate its 35th anniversary.

Prince Leonard, 79, and Princess Shirley, 76, are preparing to bequeath their kingdom to their sons, Prince Wayne, Prince Ian and Prince Richard, all farmers in their fifties.