



Passport to Pimlico - Aussie style

Micro states are springing up from Perth to Sydney with the aim of seceding from Australia - and avoiding tax

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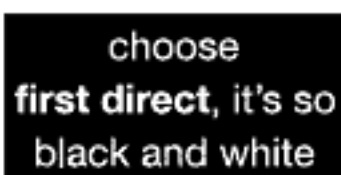
David Fickling in Melbourne
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[The Guardian](#)



Virgilio and "Little" Joe Rigoli are unhappy at being brought before a Melbourne court on tax evasion and benefits fraud charges. As self-proclaimed princes of the principality of Ponderosa - a 24-hectare (59-acre) property surrounded by a moat in northern Victoria - they are adamant that they are not governed by Australian law.



"We have seceded from the 'arse end of the world', as quoted by your prime minister," they wrote in their 1994 declaration of independence, addressed to Australia's governor-general. They believe this declaration has freed them from paying tax on A\$4.2m (£1.5m) of income over the past 10 years.



The Rigolis are far from alone in Australia. According to David Siminton, who styles himself as governor of the state of Sherwood in the principality of Camside, Australia has 22 such micro-states.

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They are as varied as the real countries upon which they model themselves, and their royal families (all but a handful have availed themselves of regal titles) are as fractious and squabbling as those of 19th-century Europe.

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But almost all agree that something is amiss with Australia's constitution, and that the Magna Carta and the Queen's role as head of state have something to do with it.

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Constitutional lawyers are sceptical about such claims, saying they are based on misinterpretations and outdated laws, but since 1970 - when Leonard Casley, a wheat farmer in Western Australia, declared himself Prince Leonard of the Hutt River Province - the micro-nation fad has been growing.

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Most either make wildly ambitious territorial claims - the principality of the Hebrides lays claims to a chunk of Victoria amounting to several hundred square miles - or say that they are "extra-territorial states", requiring no claims on property.

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One "nation" that does claim territory can be found in the seedy Sydney suburb of King's Cross. George Cruikshank's two-room flat, he says, comprises the territory of the Empire of Atlantium. The nation has its own postage stamps, coinage and flag, and boasts a citizenship of several hundred people in more than 60 countries. Coin collecting is a major earner for the micro-nation, says Mr Cruikshank - he is friendly with several ministers of Hutt River through a shared interest in numismatics.

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Mr Cruikshank - who is officially known as Emperor George II - is sceptical of some of the wilder claims of his fellow leaders, and admits discomfort at being addressed by his formal title. "I'm sure a lot of people regard this as eccentric, but the nature of statehood has always changed through history. When the 13 colonies united to form America, they weren't taken seriously either," he says.

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He is particularly scathing of those, such as the Rigolis, who have used their supposed status to avoid taxation. The princes of Ponderosa refused to speak to the Guardian while their court case was pending, and a glance at the principal ity's constitution makes such reticence understandable.

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Among the gripes addressed in the 34-page text are the granting of land rights to Aborigines, the formation of national parks and the abandonment of the law of the Old Testament. They say their principality is needed as a state where "Christians, white Anglo-Saxons and capitalists are not discriminated against".

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Mr Siminton is supportive of the Rigolis' right to secede, but even he admits that their allegedly fraudulent claim of A\$222,000 (£79,000) in Australian benefits is unwise. He himself claims not to have paid a penny in tax since 1997, and works giving public talks on conspiracy theories and UFOs.

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His ideas about his country's government are equally esoteric. "The British are looking at closing down the Australian government this Christmas," he explains. "This will be the biggest crash there has been in the history of this planet."

[In brief](#)

He says the British lord chancellor, Lord Irvine, signalled the takeover in a speech about the Magna Carta in Canberra last month. He is convinced the Australian government is running scared of the information posted on his website: "It knows very well that it is not a legal government."

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Micro-nations have been claimed all over the world, but Australia seems particularly afflicted. There is a tradition to such claims: in the 1930s, Western Australia considered seceding from the rest of the country. "It's part of the Australian character," says Mr Cruikshank. "You have this disrespect for authority, a desire not to take things too seriously."