Securing Australia – for SIVs, from SIEVs, via Edinburgh Gardens NYE

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Edinburgh Gardens is the crown jewel of Fitzroy North, one of inner northern Melbourne’s most gentrified suburbs. In 2009, Christian Lander, author of Stuff White People Like, dubbed Fitzroy North Melbourne’s whitest suburb. In January 2015, the median house price hit $1,050,000, a far cry from Chopper Reid’s stomping ground and the setting of precarious 70s student lives in Monkey Grip.

Over the past few years, Edinburgh Gardens has become a contested public space as a destination venue where large numbers gather and linger over booze and music on warm evenings. On NYE 2012 — and especially in 2013 — these spontaneous gatherings reached a peak of intensity, as tens of thousands descended on the park to party.

The NYE throng had been drifting north for years, approximating the push of gentrification. As memory serves it was 2010 when the focus shifted across Alexandra Avenue, from Smith Reserve, next to Fitzroy pool, up into the Gardens.

By 2012, NYE in Edinburgh Gardens was a ‘thing’ resonating on social media, and Yarra Council knew that tens of thousands could be expected. The park is physically big enough to accommodate these kinds of numbers. But only with the requisite organisation and will to manage it through the provision of lighting, bins, toilets. Yet after the park got hammered in 2012, in 2013 the council provided only a few more toilets and bins and some more toilet paper. It was something, but as someone there for an hour of the late afternoon of December 31, 2013, watching the gathering throngs while I pushed my son on the swing, you could tell the park was probably gonna cop it.

When the park did get trashed, the predictable blameshift started, with Murdoch and Channel 7 reporting how ‘hipsters’ and ‘illegal dance party organisers’ — from Sydney, no less — had caused the mess. Not even the kids’ playground escaped unscathed, as firm reports of revellers dropping low numbers in the kids’ cubby house emerged — c’mon, guys.

Faced with NYE 2014, the council took the decision, 8-1, to enforce an alcohol ban across the park, especially after 9pm, and organised to have the park patrolled throughout the night by private security and VicPol. You might say it was the least worst option for the council, given resource constraints. Yet cleaning the park in 2013 cost thirty thousand (which produced an outcry); the security measures in 2014 cost 250,000 dollars (which passed almost unnoticed). The decision to enforce the ban was not about simply about material resources, it was political.

The security measures were also in line with the police wishlist about ‘what works’: “fenced-off areas, alcohol inspections and private security guards and police working together”. The net effect of the ban was a quiet, smooth space: the restoration of quiet enjoyment. It fits with where Fitzroy North is headed as a postcode, which also speaks to what’s stultifying about gentrification — if you’re not the gentry. By the time vibrancy is

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Pete is currently writing a full-length work of social theory that addresses border security as a way of understanding power in transformation, as well as the co-emergence of offshore detention and onshore enclaves. The additional normative focus of this work develops the implications of border security, offshore, and enclaving as a way of thinking about global political justice, drawing on Hans Jonas, Heinz Von Foerster, and the law and custom of the sea. He also has a secondary focus on power in space, and at the moment he is examining the micropolitics of urban conflict playing out between motorists and cyclists in Melbourne, which gathers around the hashtag #boulietacks.

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being marketed, you know it’s only a few years before an enforced silence descends. The end point of gentrification is the coupling of enjoyment and restriction.

Security measures restrict lively talking, spontaneous action, and arrival without prior authorisation. They tend to preclude the kinds of spiralling disinhibition that make a party wild, just as they tend to shut down the contentious sharing of space and ideas that political conversations and protest actions are about. One way they do so is by tightening around the kinds of environments where such gatherings occur. Security makes safe by emptying out, locking down, deadening. For 250,000 dollars, security measures silenced Edinburgh Gardens NYE 2014. The party probably will not return.

As a tactic applied to a public space that’s been the beating heart of a changing neighbourhood for close to 150 years, the application of security measures to Edinburgh Gardens on its ‘big night’ is a stifling break with long held traditions of trusting people to ‘just rock up’ and use the park as they will. It amounts to saying that certain publics are the problem, and moreover problems who can’t be managed or worked with, let alone provided for and looked after, only removed. Ban these publics from the space and you indeed remove the problem, so defined. But is it then still meaningfully public? Or then: a space for whom?

Security measures are not only popularly applied in our cities. Offshore, security measures are intentionally set up and carefully maintained as part of Australia’s popular and electorally successful border security policies. Border security measures are there, in part, to prevent ‘us’ from passionately sharing deeply held concerns and supressing disagreement – while negating expressed concerns of people’s suffering. Security measures don’t just ‘stop the boats’, they’re set up to silence onshore political discussions about offshore human suffering. Like the silencing of Edinburgh Gardens, this is interested human behaviour, and is complexly political.

Yet the politics of offshore detention keeps washing ashore, in spite of the best efforts of the measures. This happened during the Australian Open men’s tennis final on February 1 this year, when play was ‘disrupted’ during the second set. As a home spectator cocooned in my apartment watching the free-to-air telecast, it was very difficult to tell what was happening. I had never wanted Courier to say more than he usually does, but here he merely muttered that ‘some kind of protest’ was unfolding.

In the following minutes, Channel 7 edited the ‘disruption’ out of frame. The selected shots kept attention studiously focused on court, alternating between facial closeups of Novak and Andy and wide screen sweeps of the on-court security. A minute or two further in, Courier started riffing on a piece of replayed footage from the previous year’s final. The high definition slow motion closeup showed the moment when Andy Murray fumbled several attempts to catch a feather that had fluttered on to court. As Courier reminded viewers, this was the moment when Murray cracked. It would be a shame, Courier concluded, if, ‘like a feather’, this disruption would cause Murray to fail — once again. But what was the ‘disruption’ about? We weren’t allowed to find out.

The ‘disruption’ was a political action protesting border security in Australia — and this means that, for these minutes at least, the broadcast staff were working as border security. Eight spectators, all of whom had paid for tickets, unfurled banners that read ‘Australia Open to Refugees’ and featured the twitter hashtag #shutdownManus. Two young women from among the protesters jumped onto the perimeter of the court, carrying banners and wearing t-shirts with similar slogans. This was all over twitter really quickly, and went global the next day. The best coverage, how very 2015, was given by Vice. Yet any home spectator relying
on the free-to-air broadcast, the statements of the organisers, the players, or subsequent reports of the final would have wondered in vain what had occurred, or why, or why it might be worth considering. Most onshore media fell into line, and stayed silent, in contrast to the sustained and favourable coverage given to Andy Murray’s ‘hottie’ Kim Sears and her ‘Parental Advisory: Explicit Content’ t-shirt – while kids on Manus are permanently barred from ever attending Rod Laver Arena.

In the years in which boats recognised as Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicles (SIEVs) were stopped by hardline border security measures, preparations for the soliciting of arrival the Significant Investor Visa, the SIV, continued. With the SIV, invest five million in selected ways and you’re guaranteed permanent residency within four years. In the past year, approvals for SIVs have increased fivefold. As of July this year, the SIV will be joined by the Premium Investor Visa: invest 15 million, get permanent residency in one year.

The preference for SIVs and PIVs over SIEVs makes pragmatic economic sense, just as it makes good politics for populists and good vision for Channel 7. But it also means that citizenship is for sale, which makes moral arguments against asylum seekers hypocritical, while it also makes the Commonwealth morally equivalent to people smugglers. If you have the money, prospective client, I guarantee you Australia – so say the smugglers to those who would board an SIEV, so say the government with their SIVs.

If this continues as it has been, border security’s next stage involves the gentrification of the entire Commonwealth along these lines. Just over the horizon, one imminent Australian future involves the muted coupling of enjoyment and restriction in a globally competitive national scale gated community. Welcome aboard, and just hope you stay wealthy enough to remain welcome.