

Red light flashing for famous Green Card

America's renowned Green Card Lottery for immigration is being phased out and, along with it, a remarkable chance for ordinary Australians to experience life in this extraordinary country, writes **Andrew Carswell**

The bright lights and charming mischief of Manhattan, the eclectic buzz of California, the pancake-flat plains of Kansas with its pitchforks and pick-up trucks. Whatever the locale, or place within the vast extremity of its lifestyle, the United States of America has always held our allure.

We've wanted to live there; to uproot our casual Australian existence to taste the Land of the Free; to try something that's different, yet still English-speaking easy; to have an adventure in a country where life is easily transferable.

Its economy may have hit a road-bump in its unwavering pursuit of national prosperity, the average median wage is a mere tickle above what a cleaner could earn in Parramatta, and natural disasters and terrorist activity are part and parcel of everyday life.

Some more than others have yearned for a Yankee life. For a generation of artists, writers, fashion designers and actors, such dreams have evolved into a rite of passage for emerging generations of artists, writers, fashion designers and actors. You've not ticked the "cool" box if you haven't lived the life as a local in a New York loft in SoHo, frequenting obscure off-Broadway theatres and smoky jazz clubs. For others, such eastern-ward journeys across the Pacific are designed to be permanent. To marry. To hide. To expand.

But our near nonsensical fascination with life in the US — given we own the motif of the Lucky Country — is not at all a microcosm of the wider world's attraction. We have but a mere passing interest compared to the obsession that obtaining a coveted Green Card is predominantly viewed in the third and developing world, where US citizenship is a deemed worthy of a life-long pursuit; their ticket out of trepidity and trials. However, that pursuit, as arduous as it currently is, is about to get a whole lot harder. The gates are, seemingly, beginning to close.

Changes to the US Immigration Bill that has already passed the US Senate will see a dramatic rethink on the way the country welcomes the world through its borders. The bill seeks

to undertake a mammoth exercise — to gradually give the 11 million residents currently living illegally in the US fully fledged citizenship, a process that is expected to take 13 years, and a policy attracting fierce debate between Republicans and Democrats.

But as a result, gone will be the renowned Green Card Diversity Lottery, which randomly selects around 55,000 people from a vast array of countries for a visa and a pathway to US citizenship, no matter their skill-set or their background — meaning the only sure-fire way of becoming a US citizen in future will be to marry one.

For citizens from obscure African nations, eastern European or Asian countries — who benefit mostly from the diversity lottery — the mooted changes kill the Green Card dream with a flick of the pen.

Even the generous E3 Working Visa scheme, open to 10,000 Australians every year thanks to the Australian-US Free Trade Agreement, does not open the door to citizenship, and is only available for those who are applying for a US-based job that requires its applicants to have a university degree.

Suddenly, the free and fair system where a truck driver from Campbelltown has the same chance of securing US citizenship as a sheep herder from Somalia, is about to disappear. Now you must have something to offer.

"It is already relatively rare for someone without skills to move to the US. Now it will be virtually impossible," says Adam Lockyer from the US Studies Centre in Sydney.

"It is clearly getting tougher. We are still yet to see what form this legislation will take, because there will need to be changes to get it through the

Americans, they just don't have the form.

"These bills are concentrating on getting those people documented. The thought of Australians coming across is not something they are visualising when they are passing these laws."

For the countless millions who have been lucky enough to secure US citizenship — now representing 13 per cent of the population — they can breathe a sigh of relief.

For six years, Farah Bala lived with the fear of having an immigration official tap her on the shoulder and escort her to the departure lounge.

She wasn't living in New York illegally, and her acting career was beginning to blossom, but her fight for US citizenship was becoming an immensely stressful and unfruitful pursuit that had dragged on for six years.

Had she missed her chance? Spending a blithe childhood on a dusty street in Mumbai, Ms Bala had opted for an unconventional, but enchanting career path for a daughter of India.

She did, after all, live in the heart of Bollywood. Acting was for her, even if her family and friends dared not associate art with a career. "Yes, but what do

you really do", was a common chide. A scholarship to the renowned Sarah Lawrence College was her first ticket into the US, a tantalising taste that solidified her belief that her long-term destiny lay in New York, where opportunity was rampant.

"When you graduate from a school in New York, you have one year where you supposedly find yourself a job and that employer will hopefully sponsor you a work visa. In my case, it was always going to be difficult because if I was going to freelance, I needed something different."

"I went to a lawyer who basically said you either get married or we go the long route of applying for the artist visa."

She had many trips back to that lawyer, whom she praises, but who was hamstrung by rigorous process. It was six years of limbo, of having to survive doing shows without pay just to build up a résumé, then the ultimate backhander — a career-making, six-month tour with a theatre company that was cancelled at the 11th-hour because the directors went cold on her paperwork.

They had to let her go. Sitting in a wind-swept

park on the Queens-side bank of the East River, Ms Bala relives her grief.

"That was really hard. Being an artist is challenging enough as it is, but living with this behind you all the time was really tough."

"I had six years of it, six years of that pressure," she says. "That anxiety, non-stop. I didn't want to go home, I wanted to stay here and build a career."

"And then the economy crashed and I was out of a job for months. It shook me — I was a little bit jaded and (had) a sense of 'how much can I do'. When can I just freely be. I was broken. You invest so much of yourself, your life, your career into it."

Ms Bala was walking the streets of Manhattan on July 22 last year when she received an email from her faithful lawyer. "Congratulations" it read, simply.

She put down her phone, allowed her mental space to be wiped clean, pondered the kindness of strangers that had contributed to her cause, and smiled. This was her moment. This was her town.

"It was a lot of pushing. If you really want this, then you have to go the extra mile. But I would say it was worth it. Life in Bombay as a family wasn't the best. It is definitely a better quality of life here," Ms Bala says.

"Now I do feel like a New Yorker, maybe a little too much. It is so fast here, and I go with fast, and when it's time to slow down it's like, this is not what I'm used to. I feel like this is home."

Charles Nyaga opened the door to his Atlanta home and stared into the eyes of his captor.

His time was up. An immigration official had some to escort his family to a detention centre in preparation for their deportation.

For this trained bible teacher, it was back to Kenya — a land riddled with corruption, nepotism and repression, where the gap between the rich and poor was growing exponentially.

Nyaga had every right to kick and scream and grab the threshold of the door with his claws. He had applied for the diversity visa lottery program and won his spot in 1998, had filled out his forms in an appropriate manner, and had ticked every box. He had won.

"But my problems began after the immigration department failed to adjudicate my case for a green card



Laura Kirkwood and partner Ben have both entered the Green Card Lottery (top); Farah Bala was lucky enough to get a Green Card (left), while Ismail Shahtaktinski (right) helps new European immigrants like these adjust to the US

in time for the September 30, 1998, deadline for the government fiscal year, even though I had put in my duly completed application and fees in February," he says.

But he remained calm, and so he says, God intervened.

orders. The Family Reunification legal track for my green card 'matured' in the nick of time to save my family and I from imminent deportation."

More than a decade later, Mr Nyaga says it feels good to be an American.

"It means that I can work, pursue my

if and when one is just on a visa.

"It provides a pathway to citizenship for me to fully participate in the national dialogue. America provides possibilities that one can only dream of elsewhere. In America, the sky is the limit."

The Green Card Lottery randomly selects around 55,000 people . . . for a visa and a pathway to US citizenship

"I was then set on a deportation course and thousands of dollars in the red from my first attorney."

"Somehow, God showed up when I was being processed for supervision under deportation

education. But more than anything else is the fact I have the freedom to pursue my dreams of a better life for my family and I in concert with the laws of the land. I am proud to be an American in spite of how America is perceived elsewhere," he says.

"The Green Card Lottery was a big dream for me, but not all I had dreamed of."

"The Green Card Lottery opens doors that cannot open

Those who have been gifted with life in the US are, understandably, the biggest supporters of the soon-to-depart Green Card Diversity Lottery.

So moved by his stroke of luck was Ismail Shahtaktinski that upon receipt of his ticket into the US, he set about making his dream become a reality to others. He became an immigration lawyer.

For the Azerbaijan-born man, getting a green card, he says, probably saved his life. "Azerbaijan is a very

authoritarian and dictatorial regime. Their corruption and violation of human rights is prevalent. Journalist are held, beaten and tortured and any body who expresses his or her opinion will receive severe persecution," Mr Shahtaktinski says.

"The average salary for a medical doctor is \$200 a month, a professor gets \$400 a month, and the cost of living is higher than here. Let's just say I am alive because I am here."

"It is wonderful to have the privileges this country offers, living here as a citizen and not having to worry about being deported."

"Now I can live, I can work, I can get loans which got me through school, I could travel in and out of the country. It was ultimate freedom."

"That chance of freedom, of a new life in the land of opportunity, now appears to be slipping away for hundreds of millions of unskilled willing-migrants — as the aforementioned trio once were — who would give their right arm to have an official slip a Greencard into their pocket."

The clock is ticking. The gates are closing.



SAMANTHA MAIDEN

Tony could lose even if he wins

WHAT happens if Tony Abbott wins the federal election — by a slim margin — but the senate blocks his plan to axe the carbon tax?

In what one of his frontbenchers describes as the "nuclear option", the Liberal leader has threatened a snap election to resolve the impasse.

That could see voters back at the polls before June 2014.

"There are mechanisms in the constitution that allow deadlocks to be resolved and I would not hesitate in using them," Abbott has said.

But the Coalition's threat to force voters back to another election quickly is looking high risk if he wins this year's election by a handful of seats.

Kevin Rudd would get a second chance at an early election. The Coalition has long assumed that Labor would roll over and accept the policy if defeated. But this assumption looks like a dumb one. Why would Rudd walk away from carbon pricing a second time? Particularly now, when he has a viable plan to dump the carbon tax and move to emissions trading? The nuclear option may have looked good when he was looking at a landslide win. But Rudd's resurrection has ensured the outcome of this year's election will be close. If the polls are to be believed, Rudd will likely gain seats in Queensland but fall short of what he needs to form government. But Abbott would not be elected by a landslide.

If that scenario were to unfold, Abbott would face an impossible choice in the first year of his prime ministership: fold on his preferred timeline for abolishing the carbon tax or embark on an early election that could prove most unwise.

The first option could destroy Abbott's credibility with voters. Rudd's leadership never recovered from the moment he abandoned carbon pricing, despite describing it as the great moral challenge of our time. The second option, calling an early carbon tax poll and fighting for re-election with only a slim majority, is a risky proposition.

History shows voters rarely turf out a government after just one term. But securing a second term has frequently proved a nail-biter. Bob Hawke went to an early election in 1984 and nearly lost. John Howard went to the polls in 1998 and lost the popular vote. While Kim Beazley did not get the swings he needed where he wanted them, Labor secured 51 per cent of the vote.

Don't make the mistake of expecting Rudd to quit politics if he loses the election. Isn't that what Julia Gillard thought he would do after she humiliated him in 2010? It proved a fatal miscalculation. Instead, he stuck around and white-anted away.

Rudd's proposed reforms to how the ALP selects a leader will make him harder to remove after the election.

He will not call an election this weekend. But it's not far away. August is looming as Abbott's date with destiny. The earliest possible date for an election is any Saturday, 33 days after issue of writs. In theory, the PM could call the election tomorrow for August 24. Or, he could announce an August 31 election. The message from the Rudd bunker is "we have more things to do" before he calls it. The last possible date for this year is November 30. But nobody expects him to wait that long.