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Very unBritish way of becoming a Brit

Candice Gifford has just become a UK citizen. It wasn't easy, she says, but the system is open to abuse and lets applicants eschew customs such as shaking hands

::nobreak::Waiting for the citizenship ceremony to start in the hushed Lambeth assembly hall, south London, I thought back to a moment when I nearly gave up on my dream of becoming British. Just like the day of my ceremony, 10 days ago, it was grey and cold outside. I had been living in London for nearly two years but I was homesick. As winter loomed I started to wonder if I wanted to stay. I'm a South African, used to sunshine and boerewors on braais, not bangers on barbecues.

But something in me made me persevere, and now the idea of whiling away the winter in an old man's pub, armed with a pint of lager and some pork scratchings actually makes me happy. I have officially become a British citizen: but the road is a rocky one, and not many who are born British realise this.

On May 9, 2001, I stood in the arrivals queue at Heathrow, nervously clutching my passport, photos of my family, and my chest x-rays (a precaution against bringing tuberculosis into the country). My ancestral visa, one I'm allowed to have because all my grandparents were born in the UK, afforded me four years of work in Old Blighty.

Four years, £335 and a seemingly insurmountable amount of red tape later, I received Indefinite Leave to Remain. This allowed me exactly what it says on the tin, except that I wouldn't get a passport. Without a British passport, I would have to continue to apply for visas whenever I set foot outside the UK. Even obtaining a visa for Paris for a weekend is like a full-blown military operation.

My mother came to London when she was 20 and my sister and I grew up on her stories of backpacking around Europe. She was adamant we would do the same when we left university. Many of my friends who came over from South Africa with me lasted a few years and returned. They missed the sunshine, their families, and, if they're truthful, the easy life.

I like the British reserve, sense of humour and the tendency towards being self-deprecating. The weather does get to me but when it gets dark and gloomy I can fly somewhere exotic. In South Africa if you're very rich, you can afford one trip abroad a year. I travel maybe six times a year, and I'm far from wealthy.

I feel British. Don't get me wrong, I love South Africa, and I always will. But England is my home.

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So although indefinite leave to remain is a nice concept, British citizenship has always been my goal. In November last year a new “citizen test” was established so that the 140,000 people who apply for British citizenship every year not only have to demonstrate a working grasp of English but also pass a test on our knowledge of life in the United Kingdom. The aim is to aid our integration into Britain’s multicultural society.

The book *Life in the United Kingdom* is 146 pages and has chapters titled *Stability and the Growth of Empire* and *Expecting a Baby*. It is riddled with grammatical errors but an interesting read, covering all aspects of British life, including history, culture, government and law.

After all my studying, the test itself, which I sat in May, was embarrassingly easy. There were some questions on the European parliament and devolved administration, which I might not have known if I hadn’t studied. But the rest were common knowledge, like “What is the legal age for buying tobacco?” and “Who is the head of state?”

You’re given 45 minutes to complete the test — I finished mine in eight. Having passed it I could apply for naturalisation. The 16-page form comes with 36 pages of guidance notes and takes hours to fill out. I hesitated over questions like “Have you ever been involved in terrorist activity?” Who the hell would answer in the affirmative?

The hardest part was making sense of all the stamps in my passport: you have to itemise every day spent out of the UK in the past five years. Every weekend break, every Christmas back in SA. Applicants are allowed to be absent from the country a total of 450 days in five years.

At the end of August I got an appointment with the new “citizenship checking service” and 10 days later an official-looking brown envelope from the Home Office landed on my doormat.

I held my breath as I read the opening line: “Dear Miss Gifford, I am pleased to inform you that your application for a British passport has been successful.” Cue much shrieking and merriment.

What followed were more forms and an invitation to a swearing-in ceremony. One form asked if I minded having my hand shaken when I become British. What could be more fitting a custom than shaking hands?

I hummed *Rule Britannia* as I shuffled in the registration queue alongside 30 other future Brits. I chatted to a few of them. Nineteen-year-old Jason Odiaga was born in Peru but moved to London with his family 13 years ago. In a cockney accent he explained that he wanted a passport so that he could visit relatives on the Continent with ease.

A Portuguese youth was born in Britain but his mother wanted him to keep his Portuguese passport. Now 18, having lived his whole life here, he decided he felt more British than Portuguese and wanted a passport to prove it.

As we were called upon to rise and say our oath of allegiance there was some confusion, as a girl in a hijab remained seated. She clearly couldn’t speak English and had no idea what was going on. Thankfully, the future Brit next to her yanked her to her feet and we resumed our promise to be faithful to Her Majesty.

One by one our names were called to come up onto the stage and receive our certificate of British citizenship. I resisted an urge to

whoop with glee.

Whether the system holds the key to a multicultural Britain or not remains to be seen. I'm sure the Home Office is as vigilant as it can be but the system is obviously open to abuse.

People can cheat at their exam, or lie on their forms. How else could a non-English speaker slip through the net and stand alongside me?

It's not a matter of race: those who cheat, or who don't feel comfortable shaking hands with the person who hands them their citizenship, aren't prepared to integrate. Those who don't integrate shouldn't be British.

As we left the hall the British weather welcomed us with a symbolic downpour. We spent the next hour traipsing around a sodden Brixton looking for traditional British fish and chips to celebrate. There were Afro-Caribbean stalls, curry houses, Chinese takeaways — you name it.

We had to catch a bus to find a fish and chip shop — a metaphor for Britain today?

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