

NZ: The Clever Country

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David Harris - [IDG](#)



David Harris, who developed Pegasus Mail, an email package used by as many as six million people at its peak, was given a Lifetime Achievement Award at the PC World Awards in Auckland on November 15. Harris, of Dunedin, a former Computerworld columnist, accepted the honour with these words:

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New Zealand is a remarkably clever little country. Wherever you go, you don't have to look very hard to find people who are excelling in their area, and in a global way, too.

They exist from one end of the country to the other. Here in Auckland you'll find Peter Gutmann, indisputably one of the finest cryptographers in the world today; and in Dunedin, you'll find ADInstruments, a small company that practically owns the world market in medical data acquisition hardware and software. In between, there are countless others, too many to mention, most of whom are probably unknown to the majority of people in this room tonight.

What is most amazing to me, though, is that so many people can excel while living in a country that gives them so little incentive, and so little recognition when they do. It's a sorry thing that a country with so much to recommend it has so little interest in its brightest and its best. There's a kind of mass inferiority complex in New Zealand, and it's probably the most regrettable facet of our national psyche. It's that little voice in the back of our minds that tells us that the imported product must be better than the local one whenever we have to make a choice; or when a sporting team that has slogged its guts out loses a game after a winning streak, it's what makes us say "well, back to our normal form now, I guess. ha ha ha".

We hear the phrase "brain drain" all the time these days, often couched in a way that imputes a kind of disloyalty to those leaving. Well it's time we woke up: when the river dries out, the buffalo will go elsewhere, and it's just the same with talent: if there's no reason to stay, how can we blame our brightest minds for leaving?

New Zealand is in real danger of becoming a McDonalds nation - nothing more than a bland plastic replica of suburban USA - simply because we can't seem to believe that we are as good as we are, or that our own culture and expertise have the value they do. As long as we remain focused on the trap of being "Little America", we're ignoring our greatest strengths: our individuality, our number-8-wire approach to finding novel solutions to problems, and an inherent humanity that believes that there might be more or better reasons for doing something than just the bucks in the bank.

I'm not accepting this award because I somehow believe I deserve it - I don't have a big enough ego for that. I don't believe that what I've done in the last 13 years is particularly important or worthy when compared with similar efforts being made by similar people all over the country, all day, every day. We would need thousands of lifetime achievement awards even to begin to give proper recognition to all these people.

Instead, I'm accepting this award in the hope that it might get the ball rolling - that it might prompt some of you to give serious consideration to local solutions the next time you have a choice; that it might make you think about just how lucky we are to live in a country where so many small, unheralded, clever people are doing so much. New Zealand is a country of winners, but if we lose sight of that and drive away our best through apathy and neglect, the only possible outcome is that we all end up the losers.