

Australia, Pacific Islanders and the Politics of Independence

Hamish McDonald

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By Hamish McDonald

[Australia's John Howard is drumming up more army battalions for future crises in the South Pacific. But as Hamish McDonald reports, this is addressing only the symptoms of the malaise in countries like Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the result of populations abandoned halfway between tribal custom and the global economy.]

William Takako and Nick Dukoro sprawl on the varnished floorboards of what was the lounge room of a Queenslander-style bungalow, once home to an Australian mineworker and his family, but now bare of furniture.

Their dark-chocolate torsos bare, they roll and smoke cigarettes made from strips of bush tobacco and newspaper, the kind known in some parts of the Melanesian islands as a "black man" (as opposed to a "white man" - a factory-made cigarette).

There are rows of houses like this in Arawa, a town in the centre of Bougainville Island: a ready-made set for some post-apocalypse movie about a civilisation wiped out by its own mistakes, a native people emerging from the jungle to occupy its vacated buildings.

Bougainville is in the middle of the so-called "Arc of Instability" where John Howard's Australian Government is engaged in a push to rebuild constitutional governments in the region's four independent states of Papua New

Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji - five if the partly Melanesian society of East Timor is included.



Bougainville, Island Paradise

The effort is costing a billion dollars a year in aid, plus ad hoc costs such as this year's \$200 million intervention in East Timor. The back-up plan is the announcement last month of a \$10 billion program to expand the army, with Howard talking about potential crises from Fiji and Vanuatu to the "inherently unstable" PNG.

Rioting in Dili and Honiara, an emergency declared in PNG's lawless Southern Highlands, and West Papuan asylum seekers crossing Torres Strait have been the backdrop to Howard's declaration of Australia's new domain.

But as soon as eight years from now, when Bougainville's 160,000 people have been promised a vote on independence, Arawa will probably be the capital of Australia's newest neighbouring nation, one named Me'ekamui

rather than after a French admiral.

In a world of villages, families, clans and tribes, the nation-state is a fragile import. Governments float on a sea of discontent about their corruption and inability to deliver even the most basic services. The widely expected exit of Bougainville from PNG will fan thinking about separation.

Among the 1.2 million West Papuans, deep longing for independence is unlikely to be long stifled by Jakarta's half-hearted autonomy offers or efforts by Canberra and Port Moresby to bury asylum seekers in obscure places.



West Papua Dani protesters demand renegotiation of mine contract

In New Caledonia, another new nation, Kanaky, could emerge from a referendum promised by France between 2013 and 2018, depending on the franchise in a population of 230,000 in which the native Melanesians, the Kanaks, are narrowly outnumbered by French, Asian and Polynesian settlers.

Except in Fiji, where the indigenous Melanesians have a homogenous culture and language and a chiefly power structure parallel to the modern state, it can be hard to find much enthusiasm for the nation. "Not many people here are passionate about the Solomon Islands," notes an official with the Regional

Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, assembled by Howard in 2003 to rescue a government and economy collapsed after a five-year ethnic conflict and costing Canberra more than \$200 million a year.

ARAWA is a stark reminder of what can go wrong if Western templates are applied to Melanesia. In the 1980s, it was the residential base for Bougainville Copper, owned by Rio Tinto. Its Panguna mine was the world's biggest and accounted for 40 per cent of PNG's exports. Bougainville was the country's most developed province, its people the richest - on a per capita basis, at least. Australian women shopped in supermarkets here, they and their husbands played golf and squash, and their children went to an international-standard school.



Bougainville Copper Mine

But it was built on a fiction: a deal signed by a small group of men in a society where women are the landowners. John Roughan, a former Catholic priest in the nearby Solomon Islands, was there when the mine started and recalls local women lying down in front of the bulldozers, being abused by men as "stupid meris" (women) for obstructing development.

"They could see in 1972 what would happen 17 years later," Roughan says.

One day in September 1989 armed men came out of the jungle and it all stopped.

Nine years of separatist guerilla war by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army resulted in an estimated 20,000 deaths from conflict and the breakdown of medical services. It ended after a desperate prime minister, Julius Chan, tried to import mercenaries from Africa to finish off the separatists, provoking a mutiny by his army.



Bougainville Revolutionary Army forces

The road to the mine is now blocked by a sign reading "No Go Zone": armed rebels keep outsiders away. Creepers grow over steel electricity pylons, the aluminium cables long cut down and sold for scrap. A yellow mining truck sits rusting, its giant tyres deflated. Rows of shops are burnt-out shells. Greenery almost hides ruined car dealerships. Dark-skinned families spill out of 1970s-design expat housing, doing their cooking on fires outside, lighting oil lamps at night.

On the northern tip of Bougainville, on Buka Island, a new autonomous government tries to exert itself, without funds or experience, accepting dubious payments from foreign mining interests. In the no-go zones, two groups of rebels hold out, one ruled by the

operator of a failed pyramid scheme, Noah Musingku, who crowned himself king last year and has five ex-Fijian Army soldiers training his followers.

AMONG the Tolai people of PNG's East New Britain, a village elder called Kolis Babate is grateful for the boilermaking and welding he learnt in his long years with Bougainville Copper, and his mentoring from its Australian, New Zealand, British and Yugoslav tradesmen. But he thinks Bougainville will leave PNG and adds: "I think the country would be better broken up. People are so different, between the islands."

The Melanesians - only 9 million of them (counting East Timor, West Papua and Fiji) but with 1300 language groups - see themselves as racial brothers and as strangers and traditional enemies.

Within their own "wantok" or language communities, they are torn between kastom (custom, or traditional lifestyle and law) and the modern economy. In Bougainville, William Takako calls it the conflict of custom and the "cargo culture" - a powerful phrase evoking the bizarre cargo cults that followed the American military's advance through the islands in the Pacific war.

Takako is at one extreme of this cultural conflict. An actor trained at PNG's national art school, he is a household name across PNG. His biggest moment of fame came in 1994 when he played Man Friday opposite Pierce Brosnan's Robinson Crusoe in a film shot in Madang.

Dukoro, 49, is also an actor, trained in Goroka, in the PNG highlands, who once performed in Edinburgh ("A very cultured place") at its annual festival. After 1989, he returned to join the Bougainville rebels, retiring after a gunshot wound.

The two have been commissioned by the

national AIDS control body to dramatise the Africa-level epidemic spreading from the mainland. But their interpretation is far from what the doctors back in Port Moresby would have ordered.

Takako sees the human immunodeficiency epidemic as the result of abandoning traditional lifestyles and diets for foreign ways and shop-bought food. "We are fatally crippled in the cargo culture system, which is the opposite of custom culture where everything is taken from the land and it's full of immunity," he says, as one of his three young female acting recruits, a coal-black woman with a mop of frizzy hair called Mary, brings in a soup of smoked fish, bitter jungle vegetables and banana. "The people who are at risk are those in the cargo culture eating processed food. It's immune-deficient."

Later, Takako leads a walk through his birthplace, the Kieta peninsula, past the ruins of the former provincial premier's house and the hotel where an Australian publican, Barry "Phantom" Walker, was once SP bookie to all of PNG. The jungle is a garden-centre-run-riot of palms, flowering shrubs and big trees, falling down to beaches backed by little villages of wood, thatch and corrugated iron houses.

"We ourselves know we are already independent," Takako says. "The crisis is seen as our 40 days in the wilderness, a cleansing process to clean us of all this cargo cult, all this book knowledge."

Me'ekamui will survive on custom, he says, with perhaps some benefit from a global carbon tax. "We've got the forests; we are cleaning the air for the whole planet," he says, with a wave skyward. "All the dirt that is created in Iraq and Lebanon comes here and is cleaned up."

Dukoro says: "You've got your own land, you've got your own place, you leave me alone for a while. Let me think." In short, Man Friday

wants Robinson off the island.

There is some validity to Takako's ideas, if not his theory on HIV infection. An Australian tradesman at the Bougainville mine taught the locals how to distil alcohol, replacing a less harmful fermented drink. Staggering drunks are a common sight. In Rabaul, a long-time German resident, Paul Schwartz, points to an "epidemic" of diabetes. "People are killing themselves with things like frozen lamb flaps [imported from Australia and New Zealand] which are 80 per cent fat," he says.

But on the opposite side of PNG, in the Amazonian landscape of the Fly River, Samuel Kepuknai has a different slant from Takako's utopian view. This region, too, has a giant Australian-inspired copper mine, Ok Tedi, levelling a peak of ore in the Star Mountains and spilling its waste into the river system.

Kepuknai makes his living from nature, each year guiding 300 foreign birdwatchers who pay him 1500 kina (\$650) a head for treks and canoe trips to spot birds of paradise and the giant crested pigeon, among 350 local species. "Ok Tedi has affected the environment very badly, due to open-cut mining and dumping the waste directly into the river," he says in his small office above a shop selling cast-off clothes from Australia. "But it's been a good thing that Ok Tedi is still going. We would never have had the infrastructure we have had up to now."

Few people look back to pure custom with nostalgia. When Warren Dutton arrived as a cadet kiap (patrol officer) in 1963, cannibal raids were still occurring among the local Yanggom and Awin people. Catholic missionaries estimated life expectancy at birth at 29 for males and 16 for females. Since Ok Tedi, the population has trebled.

The mine, and Catholic missions, are the substitute for a large absent government in this

region, Western Province, the poorest and most sparsely populated in PNG. "Ok Tedi has contributed 1.8 billion kina in tax to the provincial government over the last 20 years, and there is nothing to show for it," says Dutton, who stayed on after independence in 1975 and took PNG citizenship, running a guesthouse in Kiunga with his wife, Joy, and being elected for several terms as the region's MP.

What happens in 2013, when Ok Tedi's easily accessible ore bodies are exhausted and the mine is scheduled to close, is something Kiunga hates to think about. "It can't be allowed to close, it's as simple as that," Dutton says.

Across the Fly and up into the highlands, helicopters fly low, trailing sensors on cables to detect gas deposits like the massive Oil Search find at Hides, big enough to fuel eastern Australia for 30 years if a \$7.2 billion pipeline project is realised.

Projects such as this are the answer to Port Moresby's budget worries, but not necessarily to the needs of PNG's 5.5 million people. The Government spends all but a fraction of what it receives on its own politicians and employees.

Since independence, little investment has flowed into hospitals and schools, or telecommunications. The police force is collapsing and the army remains undeployable. Air travel is costly; banking services, and the cash economy, are contracting in the once-booming highlands, as armed hold-ups become common.

"Most of the population are left to their own devices by the Government," said Paul Barker, the director of the Institute of National Affairs in Port Moresby.

"Since independence in 1975 no infrastructure development has taken place," says Bart Philemon, PNG's widely respected treasurer

until earlier this year. "What they had was left over since independence: you're talking administrative buildings, health centres, schools, public servants' accommodation.

"In 1992 our public debt was just under 2 billion kina," Philemon adds. "By 2002 it jumped to over 8 billion kina, and there was nothing on the ground to show for that. Over that period we had the first oil coming in, we had the mining revenues and there was nothing at all on the ground to show for it."

The state came close to collapse in the late 1990s when the political pig-trade made a prime minister out of the late Bill Skate, who was wont to boast drunkenly of his links to Port Moresby's criminal class, known as raskols.

The banker-turned-politician Sir Mekere Morauta replaced him and started downsizing government, but lost power in 2002 after three protesting students were shot by riot police. The old patronage system reasserted itself, bringing back the independence leader Michael Somare. Though corpulent and sleepy-eyed at 70, Somare retains a crocodile-like political savvy, making him likely to be the first PNG prime minister to serve out a full five-year parliamentary term - helped by Morauta's rule changes blocking MPs from jumping parties mid-term.

The stability, plus a lift in mineral and commodity prices as a result of Chinese demand, let his treasurer, Philemon, pull the Government back from insolvency. In his first budget, after paying for salaries, government supplies and debt, Philemon could pull only 236 million kina (just \$100 million) from a 4 billion kina annual budget for investment and maintenance. This year he managed to enlarge it to 439 million kina, from a budget of 5 billion kina, but the country remains largely dependent on the private sector and foreign aid for development.

Through his term, Somare has shot down reform plans, including a partial telecommunications privatisation, and a program to shed 10 per cent of the Government's 75,000 employees. "That's the problem with conservative leaders in the country who want to have ownership," Philemon says. "They don't want to part with anything: it's a national asset, they don't want to give it to foreigners."

But government reform and new infrastructure is only the beginning, Philemon says. "We have 80,000 kids that drop out of grades 6, 7, 8 upwards each year. We can only absorb about 4000 or 5000 in formal employment. So we have a huge pool of kids out there who mostly have nothing better to do than turn into some sort of social problem."

In the Solomons, the governor of the central bank, Rick Houenipwela, is also looking at annual population growth of 3 per cent, while the economy is providing just over half the \$US1000 (\$1300) per capita income attained before it started collapsing under the ethnic civil war in 1998.

"People call it a time bomb," Houenipwela says. "At the moment the subsistence economy is postponing the explosion. But it's under a lot of stress. The village system can't sustain these population pressures."

The answer, everyone agrees, is small-scale agriculture, fisheries and tourism that would keep most people in villages but earning some cash on top of what they grow or catch to feed themselves.

The region is nothing if not fertile and scenic. Samuel Kepuknai, for example, has a potential market of 22 million birdwatching society members worldwide. Similar pools exist for divers, war buffs and trekkers.

But except for some urban land and coastal

plantations set up in the German territories before 1914, land stays under traditional ownership, meaning it can't be sold or mortgaged without a near-impossible tribal consensus - cutting the small growers off from conventional bank loans.

The sweeping away of traditional title advocated by some neo-liberal economists like the Australian National University's Helen Hughes has few takers on the ground. But the customary title can be clarified and registered, to avoid competing claims. Individuals within tribes and clans can get secure usage rights, and innovative ways are being tried to get finance to rubber, coffee, cocoa and coconut planters.

In Bougainville, former guerillas run a micro-lending bank for growers such as Gerard Boni, 38, who has just become a bank customer with an initial 50 kina deposit in the hope of a future loan for his two hectares of cocoa and coconuts. "We lend to the very small people whom the commercial banks and institutions don't really consider to be viable," says the bank's Clarence Cozxunie.

Meanwhile, grassroots technologists are working on ways to put more cash in the hands of small farmers. An Australian innovator in the Solomons, Colin Dyer, supplies small kilns and presses to villages so they can extract "virgin" coconut oil, which he buys at a price yielding a higher return than transporting copra (the dried flesh of coconuts) to distant buyers on fuel-guzzling tractors and outboard canoes.

In the Solomons, foreign aid donors including AusAid are helping with two demonstration plantations, showing smallholders how to grow teak and mahogany, which thrive on land already cleared and used for vegetables.

At Kiunga, Dutton has helped set up the North Fly Rubber Co, to buy blocks of latex from small grower-shareholders along the Ok Tedi-

built road up to the Star Mountains or down the Fly River.

The vision of islands patterned with small blocks of tree crops, visited by tourists paying to see native cultures, birds and fish addresses the worries of nearly everyone: economists and politicians about employment and nutrition; village elders about loss of tradition and the idle young drifting into crime and prostitution; and foreign non-government organisations and donors about the environmental damage of large mines and logging concessions.

It has worked in Vanuatu, despite a typical Melanesian government beset by corruption and factional battles in the capital, Port Vila.

The country has been relatively peaceful since independence in 1980, thanks to the strong position of village chiefs and stable traditional society, and local earnings boosted by a vigorous export niche in the mild narcotic kava, though stability is now threatened by widespread land transfers to big leisure estates.

But the village is just the talk for Melanesia's big men. Their walk is towards big projects that deliver income streams to local landowners and government budgets, and cosmopolitan life in the capital.

"There is an utter disconnect between the village, which is the natural, organic institution of traditional society, and the nation-state, which stays in Honiara," says Sue Ingram, an anthropologist directing the government reform arm of the regional mission in the Solomons.

Around Gizo, the centre of the impossibly beautiful islands in the north-west of the Solomons, pay-offs from loggers overcome efforts to preserve forests around the famous Marovo Lagoon, that has to be the centre of any sustainable tourist industry.



Marovo Lagoon

"Whole communities have split over this," says Tony Hughes, an economist who has lived in the Solomons for 30 years, and who lives in the area. "The idea that to acquire wealth you have to expend labour has suffered a serious blow in parts of the country."

Around the Oil Search petroleum wells in PNG, landowners and chiefs sit in all-day card games outside the gates, sending orders out to local stalls for cigarettes and betel nut - men of leisure thanks to 224 million kina paid since 1992 in compensation and projects. Still, the message is steadily being drummed in: do it yourself if you want anything.

In the Western Highlands village of Kelua, the Yamuga tribe gathered one afternoon recently to hand over 240 pigs to other tribes that had

helped them in a big tribal war in 1975. As Pastor George Joshua Aki read from the Book of Judges, about the Amonites being delivered into the hands of the Israelites, people in colourful paint and feathers danced with axes and spears.

Then spoke a succession of politicians, including Paias Wingti, a local boy from the Jiga tribe who became prime minister in the 1980s and who is now the elected governor of the Western Highlands, also sitting in the national parliament.

Wearing the wide-brimmed felt hat that is symbolic of a big man, Wingti lectured the crowd about the need to work hard in their village plantations and become more self-reliant. "Unemployment is the biggest problem and it's going to get worse unless we can get some economic activity going," he said.

But there was reward dispensed as well. The provincial treasury chief, Nathan Wantepe, who is supervised by the governor, stepped up to hand over an 80,000 kina cheque for new village classrooms.

Melanesian voters are not yet ready, or in some cases able, in the face of intimidation and ballot interference to abandon the patrimonial system of electoral politics. They still vote in blocks for local big men and tribal kin, seeing them, not unrealistically, as the men who allocate the trickle of funds from distant government treasuries.

"We do like our MPs to be a walking ATM," says John Roughan, the former priest in the Solomons who at age 75 was recently recruited, to his surprise, as chief secretary to the Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare. "You push a few buttons and out comes the cash. He's supposed to be a development officer, to fund your project, and a welfare officer, to provide the boat fare when someone is sick."

Elections tip out more than half of the incumbent MPs, but not always the bad ones. The violence in Honiara in April partly reflected dismay at politicians notorious for corruption and involvement in the country's ethnic conflict being returned in elections and jostling for ministerial positions again.

Nor do Melanesians support the national linkages needed to support and bring cash to village economies. Wingti sees the spur to job creation in the highlands coming from new roads, one to Port Moresby and the southern coast, another north to Madang. The idea is logical: Port Moresby gets its expensive vegetables and meat in refrigerated containers from Australia, when the highlands can grow anything.

The trans-island highway has been discussed for decades, but the will isn't yet there. Coastal people fear further influxes of aggressive highlanders, who already dominate sectors of Port Moresby's economy, and recently engaged in battles over stolen minibus fares that left several dead and shut down the city's transport for a day.

In the Solomons, the subtext of a push for federalism is a desire to limit the movement and settlement of people from Malaita island, another mobile and assertive group, who form one third of the Solomons population and whose migration into the capital, Honiara, and the surrounding country on Guadalcanal was the underlying cause of the 1998-2003 ethnic conflict. "It's always the elephant in the room," said one Australian aid official. "It is the M word here."

In the country's north, Choiseul, Isabel and West New Georgia have stronger cultural ties to Bougainville than to the islands closer to Honiara. "We're putting a lot of effort into building the state," says Roughan. "But we are not doing enough to cement the nation."

Strangers and brothers, between custom and cargo, sitting on lands swept by tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, the Melanesians are a people in transition. We should not be surprised by more upheavals, and the discarding of plans that make eminent sense to us, but not to them.

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