

Getting it wrong in PNG

By John Fowke

A PLEA FOR MORE REALISM AND UNDERSTANDING FROM AUSTRALIA

In days of old, in PNG, white men were generally addressed by non-English-speaking Papua New Guineans as 'Masta'. Today this honorific is infrequently heard; where a foreigner is known well, his first name is universally used.

Where there is no bond of familiarity; say, in a shop or a taxi, a *Tok Pisin* speaker is likely to address a foreign man as 'Boss' although 'Mate' is also widely used in application to those obviously of Oz or Kiwi origin.

In the eighties, a time when foreign personnel were being rapidly replaced with locals as managers on the coffee-plantations of the Wahgi Valley, there were daily enquiries regarding any upcoming vacancy for a 'Blakmasta'. Today, in the wisdom generated by 30 years of increasingly bad public administration and the emergence of a cynical and manipulative political elite, the term is returning into common usage to describe this ruling clique of powerful men. "*Ol Blakmasta ia!*"

Thinking Australians on both sides of the political divide are concerned about their country's relationship with Papua New Guinea. This is natural both for reasons of proximity and of history, but more specifically, questions are being asked about the monumental failure of the Howard government's recent Enhanced Cooperation Package; a major initiative which began with a bang engendered by positive experience in the 2003 Solomons intervention but one which has ended without even a whimper in circumstances which require an open examination.

ECP was an expensive, ambitious and highly publicised aid package agreed upon by the parties – and one that received a resounding knock-back when actually implemented. Within a very short time of their arrival more than one hundred specially recruited Australian police officers together with families and support retreated in a forced and humiliating manner from Port Moresby and Bougainville. Following this there has been a deafening silence from the initiator of the scheme, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Downer. Nothing is said about the stupefying level of failure in primary research and planning by DFAT, which led to the ignominious retreat of the Australian police. Nothing is said about the immense, unbudgeted cost of compensating and re-settling these Australian contractors, nor of the stress and strain they and their families have suffered. Nothing is said, either, about those others, many

others, signed on, packed and ready to go, who remained yet to take up their postings in PNG when the ECP edifice collapsed. And again, nothing is said about the abandonment of long-leased high-cost apartments and offices; of abandoned vehicles and office and communication and technical equipment and hastily terminated supply and service contracts signed with Port Moresby-based agencies.

The total cost of this incredibly-badly-planned exercise can only be imagined. Canberra will be extremely coy if asked to provide figures. What is revealed anyway is the incredible naivety, the plain, simple, old-fashioned bungling incompetence of Australia's extremely well paid diplomatic and aid mandarins.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the road to reform in PNG is through the enhancement of policing and the gaoling of a sufficiently exemplary number of those leaders proven as being corrupt; the first step, indeed, but a first step that has to be taken by Papua New Guineans regardless of any assistance that may be offered. The fact that the Australians underestimated the pressure elements of the elite of PNG is able to bring to bear, added with the already-mentioned lack of effective research and planning regarding legal and constitutional issues is a major indictment of those in charge of the ECP project. Is this the standard for all Australia's overseas aid programs? Does anyone today remember the infamous Magarini Re-Settlement Scheme in Kenya? An Australian-funded and planned and managed dry-land farming project of major proportions involving the relocation of thousands of impoverished people, Margarini was touted as the embodiment of the hands-on, Mr Fixit ethos of Australian dry-land farmers. It was in fact such a disaster that a book written about it by knowledgeable observers became a classic of "what not to do" within the world's vast aid-based consultancy industry. Since PNG's independence in 1975 Australia has implemented many generously funded projects there. Many have been failures in one way or another although none has been as embarrassingly bad as Margarini. In recent years the costly and largely wasteful South Simbu and North Simbu projects come to mind, as does the 15-year-long Assistance to the PNG Police program - costly and largely without result except for the enrichment of the relevant consultants.

It is a characteristic both of AusAID and its partners, the private consultancies that plan and execute projects, that the word 'memory' is not in their vocabulary. If there are good summing-up or debriefing procedures for project evaluation these are not activated, and whilst one can understand why, one can also understand the propensity that exists here for re-inventing the wheel. But perhaps the trouble is that summary briefings following completion are never asked for. In fact the whole sisterhood/brotherhood of the aid industry, the departmental

bureaucrats and the consultancies concerned, is collectively very quiet about what it does. This begs the obvious question: why?

Australians in general together with the breed described in the media as 'Pacific Specialists' really don't understand just how different PNG society is from that which occupies Australia. The 'Pacific Specialists' upon whose advice aid programs delivered in PNG are based obviously draw from a Western matrix for their ideas, not only because this is usually the only basis they have, but also because it is the unstated but underlying objective of all these projects to Westernise the recipient society in some measure. With only a superficial understanding of the groups of people they are working with it is natural that engagement and achievement also are superficial, together with results. PNG is a highly convoluted maze both in a physical and a conceptual sense.

Nevertheless, there is a way into this maze, and it involves knowledge of both the culture and the language of the people targeted. An ability engendered by the interest and initiative needed to move freely and without fear in street-side and village society; to speak the *lingua franca* as it is spoken by the people. To be accepted and welcomed as a friend by ordinary Papua New Guineans. Whilst the remnants of the old Australian School of Pacific Administration may have informed the early development of ANU's School of Pacific Studies a continued offering of courses helpful to those of a mind to take up the Pacific challenge (if such people there are) is entirely lacking so far as this writer is aware. More's the pity. The lack is so obvious, manifest in any encounter with a young Australian DFAT official or Australian project-consultant. The writer has often had cause to feel angry at the bland and comfortable assumption that you can take a thirty-year-old MBA from a teaching position in some Godforsaken TAFE College in country Victoria and confidently put him in charge of producing a relatively complex set of results in a rural setting in PNG. Just watching these young men and women smiling uncertainly and speaking very slowly in what they imagine to be a form of broken English comprehensible to their little captive audiences is enough to make ones hair turn white. On the other hand it is just as aggravating to be present in a hotel largely taken over for an Australian-funded police seminar, and to find that whilst the PNG police officers attending the seminar socialize together in the bars and bistro areas, the Aussie consultants presenting the seminar arrogantly dine separately in the hotel's high-cost restaurant. Insulting enough in a Western setting, in Melanesia where the sharing of food is the basis for all meaningful interaction this sort of behavior is both outrageous and provocative. The writer has been witness to many such instances of the inability or unwillingness of Australian advisors/consultants to engage at a personal level.

In 1964, in the first general election ever held in Papua New Guinea (that for the House of Assembly which paved the way for National Parliament

and full independence in 1975), the Australians introduced the Westminster Parliamentary system. In the sense that a 'loyal opposition' provides checks and balances it may have been possible at the time to see a party system as desirable; but only for a moment. For where, in this society, were the natural parties requiring representation? A simple, subsistence-based tribal society is one that defines itself on the basis of region, of 'turf'; not by social class or by possession or by disparity in terms of wealth and opportunity. Whilst it was important for the Territory to begin to address the rest of the world as a nation after 1964, the needs of a rapidly changing society were - and still are - visualised by the people in regional terms. Reason suggests that fair distribution and the empowerment of the people would best have been answered by a regionally anchored system of representation; representation able to be controlled by the electorate. Nevertheless a caricatured version of Australian party politics was allowed to arise, more by default than with intent, or so it seems today.

The party system of representation was and is like a dollop of oil dropped into the pond of PNG society. There is no affinity, the one for the other. Here, in PNG in 1964, as opposed to Walpole's England of the early eighteenth century, there was no landed aristocracy, no landless peasantry, no rentier, no hereditary class of soldier, squire and priest empowered by social position alone to oppress a lower order. Here was an almost uniquely egalitarian, subsistence-farming society whose wealth, the land upon which it subsisted, was shared by all.

The blithely-approved-and-imposed Westminster party system has been the nursery within which the political, administrative and social dysfunction that defines PNG in 2006 has developed. Far from an enfranchisement leading to the empowerment of the people, the party-system set up by - or perhaps it is better said countenanced by Australia, has led to the marginalisation of the proletariat in this once most egalitarian of societies. It has led to the growth of a small, unstable, unscrupulous but very tenacious governing elite, divided by greed within itself but united in its concern to keep and expand its hegemonic hold over the affairs of the nation through its exclusivity. The growth of the very conditions that the Westminster system slowly eradicated in Britain is, in complete paradox, the outcome of Australia's foolish decision to establish it in a setting where there was no requirement for it.

How could the Australian powers of the day have been so dense? The answer lies perhaps in the strong "them-and-us" outlook manifest in the ruling clique of senior Administration officials vis-à-vis the elected and appointed private enterprise, mission and indigenous members of the old chamber of representation, the Legislative Council, or 'Legco' as it was called.

Today it is difficult to find any record of more than superficial discussion of alternatives. At least one was readily to hand, in the shape of a fully-democratised version of the former Legislative Council supported by the nineteen existing District Advisory Councils, democratised, and the network of well-established and democratically-elected Local Government Councils then numbering more than 100. This would have been governance anchored firmly at the roots of society, government answering the reality of regional needs and interests as opposed to non-existent social, class-based or occupation-based needs.

Those who administered PNG in that time were under the thumb of the irascible, intelligent, and idealistic Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, a man who bridged no objection from an underling. Whilst a forceful man, it must be said that Hasluck suffered opposition from the largely conservative bureaucracy in Port Moresby in the form of delayed responses and obfuscation; delays which may have caused him to be unduly testy and perhaps precipitate in some of his decisions. In the late fifties one of the very few really clear-thinking and innovative officers of the post-war TP&NG Administration, the late David Fenbury, advocated “a common inter-racial franchise for direct elections to the Legislative Council...”, and again in 1960 he reminded Hasluck of this in a personal communication. Fenbury was the principal guide and philosopher of the Local Government Council system introduced into the Territory in the early fifties. Whilst respected by Hasluck as his equal in intellect, Fenbury may have been something of a *bete noir* as far as the Minister was concerned as he was probably the only senior officer in the Administration who would not defer to Hasluck in exchanges of opinion.

Hasluck and those in power in Port Moresby who failed to see the fatuity, even if not the potential menace, of the evolving party-system prior to the 1964 elections must bear much responsibility for the looming social disaster which is modern-day PNG.

As the twenty-first century opens, PNG is being forced through a process of massive social adjustment more intense than that experienced by almost any other nation. A simply structured tribal society is becoming, willy-nilly, an incredibly more complex one. However, change occurs incrementally as far as an individual is concerned; few pause to analyze and understand what is taking place in terms of a movement towards hegemony. And in any case they know that their voices will not be heard in the forum provided by the party system. So people just put up with things until an issue such as Sandline galvanizes them into brief violence.

Australia has been a humane and unusually generous foster-parent to PNG, both before and after independence. Though the standard of public administration and accounting in PNG is poor, there is a foundation of convention and methodology and procedures and principles which is well

enough established to remain in place for better times. Better times in which, with a more mature, less-self-important and all-knowing approach, Australia may be in the position to help in very important ways, in particular by engaging positively with current moves to institute a revised program of decentralization and service-provision. This has been designed and presented for comment by a group of well-qualified and respected Papua New Guineans and deserves all the support it can gather. It may be an opportunity which if lost or spoiled by half-measures does not come again for decades.

Australia laid solid foundations in terms of a wide appreciation of democratic ideals and principles among the educated of PNG, who are themselves largely the creation of Australia. There are many of these who remember the era of their elevation into literate, numerate adulthood in well-run schools managed by Australian teachers, with great gratitude; people who resent the fact that such a facility is no longer available for the benefit of their own children. It is this generation of the educated middle-aged, educated but village-based men and women, who will welcome and support an Australian effort to return PNG's dormant Local Government system to a lively, living grass-roots-governed vehicle of social and economic progress in the land. Here is the place to spend the remaining loot from the unfortunate ECP scheme.

Noted Australian poet and friend of PNG, the late James MacAulay, once said something to the effect that what Australia achieves in its relationship with PNG will come to define Australia as a nation. When we think of Australia's own history as the Prison Colony of Great Britain and of the ambivalence many Australians of the twenties and thirties of last century felt regarding Australia's growing role as a colonial power in PNG, MacAulay's statement has great resonance, and as well, great meaning for the future. PNG's ongoing social crisis is not just today's problem; nor is it just PNG's problem; substantial assistance is needed and it will come from nowhere but Australia. This is as it should be. But in the manner of its giving, Australia must be much more insightful and much more cognisant of the causes of the problems of its close neighbour and ally.

This article was published in 'Quadrant' in December 2006 and in the PNG 'National' in January 2007. John Fowke has spent most of the past forty-eight years living and working in rural Papua New Guinea.