

Pacific Reflections in a Time of Change

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1. I want you to picture a scene. It is 4 o'clock in the morning with dawn just breaking over the eastern Fiji island of Lakeba, home of one of the country's highest chiefly families. My wife Helena and I are sitting on the grass with a large group of Islanders outside the bure of their great High Chief Ratu Mara gently singing traditional songs so that their leader will gradually awaken to the lilt of his people welcoming him on the morn of his 75th birthday. The stars, those Pacific stars that are so bright and large that you feel you can reach up and touch them, gradually go out as the sun rises over the international dateline to herald another day in that magical world of the ocean of peace. This occasion was only a few weeks after we had arrived in Fiji to promote British interests in the South Pacific. It remains our abiding memory of the traditional life of the peoples of this remote region, traditions that it is important they should retain in the face of globalisation and the demands of the 21st Century world.

2. We are all used to looking at a map of that world and identifying the Pacific Ocean as a pretty big chunk of blue. But does anybody here know its area, to the nearest 10 million square kilometres? Representing some 31% of the Earth's surface area, it is a little over 166 million square kilometres, just under half of the world's total ocean surface area. It is home to the deepest undersea point at 10,900 metres, in the Mariana Trench. That is a mighty lot of water.

3. If we exclude the islands of Japan and the Philippines and other littoral states to the west, and look at the island states of the ocean, including New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Hawaii we see a total land area of 835,000 square kilometres, that is just half of one percent of the ocean's area. Take away New Zealand and PNG and we are left with an area of 105,000 square kilometres or 0.06%.

4. I give you these figures to bring home the almost infinitesimal smallness of the countries we are interested in, compared to their overwhelming surroundings of this gigantic ocean, as well as to demonstrate their remoteness. I used to illustrate these distances by telling the FCO that our patch, with which my Mission based in Fiji was concerned, was the equivalent, end-to-end, of the distance from London to Mumbai, or Bombay as it then was. But these miniscule land areas are only one part of the story. All of these countries have an EEZ, the sea area called an Exclusive Economic Zone from which they are allowed to benefit. The proportion of land area to EEZ is quite staggering for some of them, particularly the smaller far flung atoll states. The largest EEZs are of French Polynesia 5m sq km, which is twice the area of the Mediterranean, Kiribati 3.55m sq km and PNG 3.12m sq km. However, with only 26 sq km of land Tuvalu has the greatest sea to land ratio of 34,615 followed by Tokelau with a ratio of 29,000 and Pitcairn with 20,513. While I am regaling you with statistics, it is worth considering that the PICs (the Pacific Island Countries that are Members of the Pacific Community) control equatorial airspace from 140 degrees E through the International Dateline to 150 degrees W – almost 20% of the total equator – increasingly important for space rocket launches.

5. So we can see that the majority of the smaller states are land poor but sea and air rich. However, it is only when one can exploit resources that their inherent wealth can be used for the benefit of the peoples who own them. It is worth, at this stage, considering what these resources are and the limiting factors on their exploitation. Here we can only talk about known resources and those identified through the technology currently available as having some use. Some 30% of the ocean bed has yet to be properly mapped through SOPACMAPS, in which EU money has been important. Yet work to date has already produced a wealth of resource assessments in the fields of fisheries, hydrocarbons and minerals. British Geological Surveys are optimistic that in the longer term some PICs could receive economic benefits from their non-fish deep-sea resources. However the PICs are small and lack the technical expertise to understand and develop much of this potential. Because of this naivety the PICs are exposed to less ethical organisations. This is where strong regional organisations well supported in scientific, technological, legal and negotiating expertise must play an important role. The Forum Fisheries Agency is the prime example of bringing the countries together to negotiate better deals than the PICs could do independently. Having said that, another statistic worth mentioning is that the PICs only retain 3 to 4% of the market value of their fish resources captured by outside fishing vessels.

6. I mentioned technological developments potentially throwing up new opportunities. I came across one the other day in the form of a type of seaweed that absorbs prodigious amounts of greenhouse gasses and converts them into oxygen. When harvested at the end of its period as a gas exchanger, it is a rich source of biomass energy: when blasted with superheated steam the seaweed discharges hydrogen and carbon monoxide gasses that can be used to create a bio-fuel, which, in turn, discharges no extra carbon dioxide when burnt. Scientists at Mitsubishi and Tokyo University are planning a pilot version of a farm next year. A limiting factor is the huge sea areas required for the farms that could be 6 miles square floating mattresses of weed. Well, we know that the PICs are rich in sea area. As well as providing the location, I think there might be potential for the PICs to invest in such farms themselves and then move into the fast-growing field of carbon emissions trading. This technology has the potential to make one of the greatest contributions to the reduction of greenhouse gas emission and global-warming. It would be great to have such a major contribution to a global problem coming from some of the smallest countries on Earth.

7. Let us look at the peoples who inhabit this "Pattern of Islands" to quote a well-known phrase. The first and most obvious fact is that there are so few of them: excluding the developed countries of New Zealand and Hawaii, there are around 5.7 million, of which 3.7 million live in PNG. These small numbers of people live in 21 countries and territories, 11 with a population under 100,000. All of these have to have governments or administrations requiring Governors, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Parliamentarians, Civil Servants, Diplomats, Local Government Officials and so on. The demand for leaders and managers to tackle the huge problems facing small remote communities with few resources is considerable. In most of these countries it is only the last two generations that have had the opportunity for tertiary education and the numbers professionally qualified are still quite small. Without the far-sighted founders of that marvellous regional University of the South Pacific, the number of graduates would be much much less. But a degree from USP is only a building block; the wider experience required to make a good manager or leader is not easy to come by. The paucity of institutions in the region and the quality of the experience available to Pacific Islanders lead to standards that lag well behind the norms of the developed world, standards that are moving into greater complexity which demand higher and higher qualities. So, it seems to

me that the skill deficit will only increase unless huge efforts are made to get high quality education and work experience for Islanders. My colleague, Vernon Scarborough, and I tried hard to get the FCO to fund scholarships for chiefly young Fijians at Oxford. Wadham College, where Ratu Mara studied, were willing to develop a one years Masters to give Fijians a broad exposure to modern thinking and practice that would stand them in good stead when they rose to positions of leadership back in their country. This is what had happened to Mara himself and he had served Fiji well in the 60s and 70s. Senior Fijians supported the idea but unfortunately we were unable to get the necessary resources from HMG for the scholarships. The Fiji government did not take the idea forward with their own resources, either because they did not value it as highly as they had intimated or, more likely, because of poor management within the government machine. The result, there is a paucity of senior Fijians with the stature and experience to get hold of the country and move it forward as it needs and deserves.

8. For many years it has been obvious that regional co-operation can help to mitigate the effects of this skill deficit. The South Pacific Commission, now the Pacific Community was in the vanguard, having been established in 1947, well before the EEC. I saw this body as crucial in terms of delivering day-to-day advice and assistance over a wide range of technical and social issues and that was why I argued so hard to get the UK back in, following its withdrawal in 1995. The warmth of the welcome for the UK at the 1997 50th Anniversary Meeting in Canberra showed how much this country's presence was valued. However, I was only able to advance the arguments I did because the institution had been rejuvenated by the shakeout handled by the Australian, Bob Dun. The fact that the British Government has again withdrawn is shocking and lets down all our friends in the region.

9. More important still is the Pacific Islands Forum, the political body established in 1971 to bring together leaders of the independent PICs. It is through this institution that the region's interaction, both economic and political, takes place. Australian and New Zealand membership allows PIC leaders to work jointly with their big neighbours on the most pressing of the regional issues. But, like the SPC, the work of the Forum was held back by the comparative weakness of the political leadership and the Secretariat. The "Pacific Way" of consensus building is not always the most productive avenue in the modern world of international negotiation and competition. Another restraining factor was the unwritten rule that, like the SPC, the leadership had to come from the PICs rather than Australia or New Zealand. The mould was broken by Bob Dun's appointment to the SPC and his demonstration to the PIC's that a non-islander could still work for the best interests of the island countries. So, the appointment of Australian senior diplomat and Pacific expert (he is married to a Samoan) Greg Urwin as Secretary General of the Forum has led to a step change in the way that issues are approached and handled. A survey of the Forum web site demonstrates the quality of the thinking now going on in the Forum. In a recent speech Urwin said:

"The Pacific has reached the end of what it is probably convenient and reasonably accurate to call its immediate post-colonial phase. In other words, that time in its history when the institutions, methods and practices inherited from the colonial period and made use of during the first years of political independence have come under increasingly critical scrutiny as to their ongoing usefulness. And it seems to me altogether unsurprising that the process, to which the reaching of such an historical moment gives rise, should be a complex one. After all, what is essentially going on is that people, a quite broad range of people, are trying to redefine what it will take to run their countries into the long-term future. I don't think it is stretching reality to say that this analysis has applicability

even in situations where serious breakdowns have taken place, such as Solomon Islands and Bougainville. It is far from being a negative process, except where it exceeds certain bounds, as in the cases I've mentioned or unless you take the - to me - quite unrealistic view that we are drifting away from some mythical past golden age. It will often be a somewhat messy process - genuine change is like that. It may well be a sign of ongoing political maturation and, as such, the cause for considerable optimism"

10. Last year in Auckland, the Forum Leaders, echoing their fathers 30 years ago, adopted a vision. I quote: "Leaders believe the Pacific region can, should and will be a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that all its people can lead free and worthwhile lives. We treasure the diversity of the Pacific and seek a future in which its cultures, traditions and religious beliefs are valued, honoured and developed. We seek a Pacific region that is respected for the quality of its governance, the sustainable management of its resources, the full observance of democratic values, and for its defence and promotion of human rights. We seek partnerships with our neighbours and beyond to develop our knowledge, to improve our communications and to ensure a sustainable economic existence for all". This is a worthwhile aim for an organisation that plays an increasingly pivotal role within the region and which provides its diplomatic and political face to the wider world. In the political sphere, it is certainly the case that the Forum exerted considerable influence in respect of the situation in New Caledonia, and did so even more effectively, perhaps, in respect of the struggle against French nuclear testing. And more recently, the Pacific region has taken a leading role in shaping that part of the international agenda that addresses the special problems of small-island developing states.

11. The rapid changes in the economic environment brought about by globalisation led to the development of PACER and PICTA Agreements, or to give them their full titles, the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) and the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA). PACER is a regional trade and economic cooperation agreement among all Forum members, including Australia and New Zealand. It entered into force on 3 October 2002. PICTA is a free trade agreement, initially applying to the 14 Forum Island Countries, and it entered into force on 13 April 2003. While the PICTA is based initially on trade in goods, consideration is already beginning within Forum Island Countries to the possible extension of the Agreement to include trade in services. Such a step could have obvious implications in terms of the supply of services and the mobility of labour among PIC countries; the harmonisation of accounting and other professional standards; and new opportunities and challenges facing service providers.

12. In another important field, very promising work is being done on the strengthening of regional legislatures, this against a fairly general perception that, over the years, regional Parliaments have been overshadowed by powerful Executives. Forum Leaders have adopted nine principles of good leadership, as part of their on-going focus on improving the quality of governance in member countries. Of course, implementation is everything, which only highlights the fact that good governance is not something to be left to government alone. It is a goal that needs to be taken up by civil society, the public and private sector, and at the community level. A good example of the latter is the work being done in Fiji by PISUKI's former Chairman, the Reverend Akuila Yabaki.

13. The coups in Fiji in 1987 presaged a range of security problems in a number of PICs. Again the Forum has gradually become more involved. Notable efforts in this area include the 1992 Honiara

Declaration on law enforcement cooperation; the 1997 Aitutaki Declaration on regional security cooperation; and the 2002 Nasonini Declaration on regional security. All have been backed by extensive enabling measures. All of those instruments are about the strengthening of in-country arrangements and cooperation among countries. The 2000 Biketawa Declaration is about those things too, but it goes further because it contains guiding principles and measures for a regional response to crises in the region. It was the Biketawa Declaration that led to the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Both Biketawa and RAMSI marked a clear shift in the Forum's attitude to serious civil crises in the region. While Biketawa recognises, fundamentally, national sovereignty, it for the first time outlines a series of measures that can be taken at a regional level to help a Forum member in need of urgent assistance. There is still much to do in Solomon Islands but it seems that RAMSI has restored a level of public safety not enjoyed in that country for a number of years.

14. The above examples show that much is being done despite the poor educational and work experience that I mentioned earlier. However, when we look more closely, despite a reasonable performance, globally speaking, in respect of human development indicators including GDP per capita, the general situation in many of the islands is that of under-development and even of considerable poverty. For those countries for which data are available, poverty rates are higher than that which would be expected in countries with the same per capita income. Some observers estimate that in some countries 20-30% of the population live in poverty. In some countries up to seven times as many young people are seeking work each year, as there are new jobs available, and in some areas, population growth outpaces economic growth by 2 to 1. This shows that headline figures can hide the underlying human misery. It is a great pity that our international development policy-makers in Britain have become so Africa-focused that they have turned away completely from bilateral involvement in the Pacific, which, in turn, has meant a rapid diminution of effort by other UK based NGO's such as Beso and VSO who are largely dependent on DFID's financial encouragements.

15. When I left Fiji in 1997 I had some reason to feel some optimism for that country, having just seen the new Constitution ratified by Parliament and Fiji rejoining the top table at the Commonwealth in the Edinburgh CHOGM. Fiji's geographical position and comparative size give it a potential leadership role and I thought that stability in its political system might allow it to exert that regional influence. I qualified the optimism because I had seen at first hand how difficult it was to get most things done. I had been piggy in the middle between Rabuka and Mara; both men wanted the same thing for Fiji – the Constitution and the Commonwealth but there was precious little sign of co-operation in attaining those goals. I knew that in renewing political and legislative institutions there would be a hard row to hoe but, of course, Speight appeared on the scene and with his activities he sought to destroy the plough and thus the seeds of a new order were scattered over stony ground. At least Rabuka had made some amends for his past misdeeds but I am afraid that I found Mara less than impressive as a leader in his later years. I think he lost it in 1987 when, so far from supporting the Governor-General in the latter's endeavours to preserve constitutional government, he threw in his lot with the coup leader, Rabuka. Survival became the major issue as his thinking became increasingly muddled and ideas confused. But by being the Paramount Chief and occupying the throne he held up the development of a new and modern leadership. There was nobody able to recover the situation post-Speight and put the ship of State back on the course it had set in the heady days following the new Constitution in 1997. It seems that today the ship is drifting

still and making little progress. Those long-term problems, land and sugar, are still in limbo and are as dependent as ever on serious co-operation between the communities, co-operation that is hard to spot. There is still scope for political tension, increasingly evidenced by the hotly- debated Unity Bill. However the Commonwealth link remains a potential source of UK and wider influence.

16. All the more important therefore for the countries of the region to work together and provide collective leadership. A recent review of the work of the Forum by an Eminent Persons Group concluded, and I quote: "Success will depend on the region having a clear vision of its future and a plan for getting there. This Review proposes both. The Vision acknowledges both Pacific traditions and 21st century realities. It involves a redefinition of the traditional "Pacific Way" of doing things. The plan - named here the Pacific Plan - is intended to build on the generally successful process of regional cooperation that has evolved during the past several decades. We suggest a range of areas in which early progress might be made, but precisely how far and in which direction the Plan evolves is a question for Leaders. The bottom line is that future inter-country relationships will need to be closer and more mutually supportive if the region is to avoid decline and international marginalisation. Enhanced regional cooperation and integration, and the sharing of resources of governance, are likely to be features of future developments. New thinking about the relationships between sovereign states may hold the key to future sustainability. The Pacific Islands Forum, as the pre-eminent political grouping of the Pacific region, has a pivotal leadership role in helping to ensure the Pacific Island community of states survives, prospers and is secure. In order to carry out its role effectively in a fast-changing world, it is imperative that the Forum reconsider its strategic role and the way it functions. We consider that the Vision, mandate and work plan of the Forum should be clearly defined and directly relevant to the lives of Pacific people and their daily concerns. The Forum must be clear about its key priorities, which we assess as economic growth, sustainable development, governance and security. The efforts of the Forum should reflect and be guided by a strong sense of Pacific heritage and cultural identity".

17. I would like to end with another quote from Greg Urwin which I believe gives reason for optimism, my preferred state of mind. He said: "The Eminent Persons' Group stated: "New thinking about the relationships between sovereign states may hold the key to future sustainability". At the end of the day, one knows in one's heart that this is so. These are a difficult set of issues for a region that has only enjoyed its modern political independence for thirty odd years. They are issues that will need to be worked out, thrashed out over a protracted period. They represent a bigger issue than the Pacific Plan itself. But in a globalised world, which, for all its undoubted benefits, often does the smaller and more vulnerable players few obvious favours, we must, surely, look to develop the decision-making architecture that will give us the best chance to make our way. That's a daunting prospect in a number of ways, but in my view, one that should be embraced, chastely perhaps at this stage, rather than feared. From where I'm standing, it is, from the point of view of all those concerned for the Pacific's future, no bad time to be alive".

18. We trust that he is right.

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