

CHANGES IN AUSTRALIA'S APPROACH TO THE PACIFIC?

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Madame President

First let me say how delighted I am to be here at New Zealand House, addressing the Pacific Islands Society.

As Prime Minister Rudd said in Niue on 21 August 2008 “the Pacific and the Islands of the South Pacific are core business for Australia’s national interests”. So your Society is a natural ally of mine here in London – just as New Zealand is our most natural ally in the Pacific. As you know, my immediately previous post was in Wellington where the greatest stimulation was the work we did together in the Pacific – working in particular with two great Pacific hands, Deputy Secretary Alan Williams of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Greg Urwin, Secretary General of the South Pacific Forum. Both men, very sadly, are now dead at far too young an age.

In any case, this is clearly a very appropriate gathering for me at a very appropriate place.

Now the question mark that I have included at the end of the title of my address today is very deliberate. That is because although the Rudd Government has approached the Pacific with great vigour and a fresh tone and style, it would be wrong to conclude that we have been dilatory in the Pacific over recent years. RAMSI remains an impressive testament to the previous government’s commitment to the region. And governments before them had also been very active. Here I point, in particular, to the record of Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who, on the day that he became Minister in 1988, said to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that he wanted to make his first overseas visit to the Pacific and that he wanted it to be in ten days’ time! This was a whirlwind tour, as only travelling with Gareth can be, and the substantial group of travelling journalists whom he took with him christened it “the take no prisoners tour”! The then Senator Evans was inclined to say that if we could not get policy in the Pacific right, we had little or no chance elsewhere.

It is certainly possible to argue that Australia had very often adopted too complacent an approach before that. And we had, at best, a mixed colonial record in PNG where we were plainly too slow to embrace the idea of PNG’s independence and then, arguably, too quick in bringing it about.

But certainly from Gareth Evans's time there has been a real positivity to our approach which had not been characteristic of Australian policy before. That positivity was an approach that the Pacific had problems which went beyond "the growing pains of adolescent children". That is not language which I would ever have used but it reflected a perspective on the part of Australia towards the Region for too long, in the immediate wake of independence for many of the Pacific Island States.

Gareth's great first tour of the Pacific in 1988 was only a year after the first coup in Fiji. It was, as I have suggested, memorable for many reasons, not least Sitiveni Rabuka's refusal to let us visit Fiji, despite having earlier agreed. We went to the Cook Islands instead and had an agreeable little respite there in between intensive programs elsewhere. But that incident and the Fiji coup of 1987 had already underlined for us, and for Gareth in particular, the challenges to the peaceful vision of the Pacific which we all, Pacific Islanders themselves included, had somehow convinced ourselves made this region of the world different from others.

Gareth Evans's 8 years as Foreign Minister continued to be a period of serious focus on the Pacific. And, in fairness to his successors, by the time they came to government in 1996, it was clear that the region was significant and required substantial Australian Government focus. They brought their own commitment and vigour and it manifested itself in some important ways. Foreign Minister Downer made an annual pilgrimage to the Pacific for almost all of his 12 years as Foreign Minister, going there to visit a number of countries each December. This was in addition to other visits he would have, for more immediate reasons, had to make during the year.

The Howard Government also advanced the idea of the Enhanced Cooperation Program with PNG which, for a variety of reasons did not come to full fruition, but did something to carry our relations with PNG forward. And, most of all, they took a giant step towards ending the civil war and restoring governance in Solomon Islands with our commitment to RAMSI – a commitment which has already cost the Australian taxpayer some billions of dollars.

So in those senses you will see that there has been a real continuum about Australian policy in the Pacific for many years now. That continuity has encompassed a number of features. First, a real recognition that the problems of the region are great. Second, that the problems of the region are more than just the problems of development. Third, that we, along with New Zealand, will inevitably bear the major burden of addressing these problems. And fourth, that it is an expectation of the rest of the world that we do so.

These things have certainly been picked up with great vigour by the Rudd Government since their election in 2007. They, like Gareth Evans before them, also addressed these problems as amongst their very earliest foreign policy priorities.

Where the Rudd Government have particularly sort to differentiate themselves from their predecessors has been in the tone in which they have prosecuted policy. They have argued, soundly I believe, that the tone they have adopted has been much more about understanding and is less aggressive than some of the language from Ministers before them, in particular some of the language used around RAMSI and the ECP, for example. Let me quote from a recent speech of our Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith.

“In any conversation, the tone you adopt can matter as much as the substance of your discussion. The tone of exchanges with our friends in the Pacific certainly needed changing when we came to office.

“We committed ourselves from the outset to change. Progress and reform are far more likely to be achieved through a respecting and respectful relationship.”

And the Government was able to claim some striking early successes in this approach. Most particularly this has been with the Port Moresby Declaration and all that has gone with it. The Port Moresby Declaration sets out the main elements of the Rudd Government’s approach and does so in language which deliberately focuses on partnership and cooperation, rather than forcefulness and confrontation. Let me quote some of the language from the Port Moresby Declaration:

“The Government of Australia is committed to beginning a new era of cooperation with the island nations of the Pacific.”

“Australia respects the independence of the island nations, and the diversity and complexity of development challenges across our shared region”

“Australia and the pacific island nations face a common challenge in climate change.”

“The Government of Australia proposes to pursue Pacific Partnerships for Development with our pacific island neighbours.”

“Under the Pacific Partnerships for Development, the Government of Australia will be prepared to provide increased development assistance over time in a spirit of mutual responsibility embracing commitments by the Pacific island nations to improve governance, to increase investment in economic infrastructure, and to achieve better outcomes in health and education.”

“Australia proposes that, progressively over the course of the coming years, we negotiate Pacific Partnerships for Development with those of our Pacific neighbours that share this vision.”

There are a couple of points to make about the Port Moresby Declaration. The first is that it was developed against a background of a determination to cooperate closely at all times and without some of the recrimination that sometimes characterised our cooperation in the past, with New Zealand. Before the release of the Port Moresby Declaration Mr Rudd particularly asked me to show it to Prime Minister Clark of New Zealand to get her comments. She was delighted to be consulted and had a couple of useful suggestions to make. These were immediately incorporated into the text.

Second, partnerships have now been concluded with four Pacific Island countries – PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Kiribati. Others are in the works. An element in the negotiations will in many cases be access on a trial basis for Pacific Island workers to the Australian labour market. This removes a long-standing irritant between Australia and our Pacific neighbours, an irritant that the New Zealanders had got past some time ago.

Third, there are already practical benefits from the heightened cooperation visible in recipient countries. Programs are bigger, better focussed and, above all, jointly negotiated.

There are some other significant elements to the Rudd Government’s approach, of course. First, we have seen the appointment of Deputy Ministers for both Pacific Island Affairs and for International Development. This has enabled the Government to throw additional Ministerial fire power at the issues involved in heightened cooperation. I admit, frankly, that I had personal doubts about the appointment of a Minister for Pacific Island Affairs, worrying that this would dilute the attention of the Government as a whole, and that of more senior Ministers, to the Pacific. Happily, I have been proved wrong and the Prime Minister right. That is always a good outcome!

Second, Mr Rudd has made clear his determination to have the Pacific Island Forum held in Australia this year and, again, to do this in Cairns in North Queensland rather than in Canberra where Pacific

Island leaders might find waking up to temperatures of minus 5 rather challenging. The sunnier climes of Queensland will be an agreeable surround for this important meeting.

Mr Rudd's commitment to hosting the Forum reflects the overall strength of Australian commitment to maintaining the Forum's primacy in regional affairs. It has been the Forum where discussion of the difficult issue of Fiji has been most crucial and in this context I pay tribute to Premier Talagi of Niue, the current Chair of the Forum. He became Premier only a short while before the Forum last August and we were a little uncertain about him, knowing less about him than we did about his very long serving predecessor, Young Vivien. But Premier Talagi turned out to be a very effective Chair with real executive skills, which he demonstrated at last year's Forum which Commodore Bainimarama foolishly chose to boycott.

And, I believe that it is because the Forum has been so effective in addressing the issues to do with Fiji that Commodore Bainimarama has sought both to cast the Forum as the agent of Australia and New Zealand and to turn to others, including the United Kingdom and China, for succour.

Those of you who know Prime Minister Sevele of Tonga or Prime Minister Tuialepa of Samoa or Grand Chief Michael Somare of PNG will know that the idea that the Forum is simply the plaything of Australia and New Zealand is a ridiculous idea. There are indeed, as there have always been, leaders of great wisdom in the Pacific who are deeply concerned by the fundamental challenge to regional governance which the regime in Fiji presents.

While we in Australia certainly welcome the interest of external players in the Pacific, players that include the EU, China, Japan and the United Kingdom, and while we particularly welcome their development assistance support, the region's fate must be decided by regional leaders. It is the political integrity of the Forum which is the region's greatest political asset.

Australia has always been committed to the Pacific and that commitment, for at least the last 20 years, has been vigorous and sustained. We will always be committed. It is worth recalling that Australia provides over half of the development assistance disbursed in the region and that less than half is provided by all of the other donors put together. But, in providing this assistance, we intend particularly to work with the countries of the region as partners. We will do so bilaterally, but above all we will do so working in the region with the region's pre-eminent body, the Pacific Island Forum