

Putting Pacific people in Australia's Pacific policy

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Submission:

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the Pacific Region

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I am Journalist Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. As ASPI does not offer
institutional views, this is my personal submission.

Email: 

Summary

- Australia's step-up asserts its interests, influence and values in the South Pacific. The step-up must complement the Blue Pacific idea of 'region-led and owned'.
- Beyond geopolitics and geoeconomics, the biggest challenge for Australia is to get South Pacific people at the centre of our South Pacific policy. And Melanesia must drive and define our policy.
- In the words of a veteran Fiji journalist, 'Everyone around here [the South Pacific] knows that Australia is needed. But that doesn't mean you'll ever be loved.' If I have a creed for Australia in the islands, that's it. The need cuts both ways. We need and want much from the region, just as the region needs much from us.
- Australia's offer of economic and security integration is a big idea that asks deep social and political questions of the islands. Australia and New Zealand propose, but it all depends on the island response. They must accept. The South Pacific decides. The weighting and of the committee's terms of reference has this exactly right, with its emphasis on the **priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries**.
- The language of family and partnership and neighbourhood can drive practical integration, helping the evolution from South Pacific community to Pacific Community.
- Australia should make a major new commitment to public broadcasting in the South Pacific.
- To resolve the domestic-international tensions at the heart of the charter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a new Australian International Broadcasting Corporation should be created.
- The annual budget for international broadcasting to the Asia-Pacific should increase from \$16.7 million annually towards \$75 million.

Australia is doing a lot of thinking about what steps to take in the South Pacific.

How high does the [‘Pacific step-up’](#) have to go? How many different steps? Step style? Step hierarchy? How to avoid oversteps or missteps or just stepping in it? Can the step-up hit its stride?

Canberra hums. Six step-flavoured reviews and inquiries are afoot.ⁱ

Australia's promise to take [‘our partnerships with the Pacific to a new level’](#) prompts valid questions from the islands, based on our record.ⁱⁱ

The attention Australia gives the South Pacific has waxed and waned, belying our deep and abiding interests. A while back (2003), I described this cycle of Pacific forgetfulness and rediscovery—attention not matching interests—as a mix of policy taboos, popular amnesia and political failure.ⁱⁱⁱ

We might be at the high point of another cycle. Or maybe Australia can, as it promises, lock in a ‘new level’ of partnership. The islands ask whether Canberra is on the level and what level it can go to, and whether it can maintain this level of enthusiasm. Six inquiries will provide a report card and a prognosis.

Australia's ‘showing up’ in the region has increased dramatically since November 2017, when the step-up got going. The plan is a key element of the Australia's foreign policy. The 28 components of the step-up constitute an ambitious to-do list. In the region, though, as Dr Tess Newton Cain notes, there's still ‘healthy scepticism’ about whether Australia can sustain its policy focus.^{iv}

Merge a couple of fairy tales for some judgement lines on the step-up.

Canberra likes to think of itself as the handsome prince. The Pacific islands, though, can perceive a sleeping beauty or a slumbering giant—part of the story, potentially important, but not always alive to what's happening.

Playing on the ‘step’ theme leads to the fact that often Australia is seen as the ugly stepmother or selfish stepsister (think climate change and the [‘Pacific solution’](#)).

Awoken, Australia pushes to be the king of the castle: the top economic and security partner for the islands. The self-proclaimed partner of choice is anxious to be chosen.

Looking in the magic mirror, Canberra asks, ‘Who is the fairest of them all?’ Trouble is, the mirror replies that this is a complex question with different answers. And, by the way, China is looking good these days.

The mirror offers Canberra a sharp instruction: ‘Toughen up, princess! Time to get going.’

The toughen-up line also applies to the insights offered in the [Whitlam Institute survey](#) of island attitudes to Australia in Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu, based on field research conducted in late 2019.^v

In *Pacific perspectives on the world*, the Institute said the focus groups and one-on-one interviews with 150 Pacific islanders offered these messages:

- The quality of Australia's relationships matters more than the quantity of our aid or trade;
- Our values, norms and ways of doing things are a vital part of how we conduct our engagement with the Pacific;
- Australia, and its historical relationship, is valued but we are one of many partners for Pacific islanders.

The institute's director, Leanne Smith, says the step-up is a step in the right direction, but it's 'perceived to be a unilateral Australian initiative, something being done "to" the Pacific rather than with countries of the region'.

Australia is seen as an important partner, but as Smith observes, there's also 'a perception of a certain level of racism and disrespect directed towards people from the Pacific'.

Reading the report, my mind went back to a conversation with a great Fiji journalist and fine bloke, Robert Keith-Reid, the founder of *Islands Business* magazine. It was the year 2000 and Suva was under military rule because rebels had seized parliament, holding the prime minister and cabinet hostage (covering my third Fiji coup, I called this '[The strange saga of Speight's siege in Suva](#)').^{vi}

Keith-Reid's house near parliament had a temporary military post in its front yard; typically wry, he reported that his daughter had been taught by the troops how to strip down a weapon in near-record time.

After making what turned out to be accurate predictions about the ambitions of the military commander, Frank Bainimarama (he'll always be the supremo, to me), Keith-Reid mused on Australia's role in the South Pacific.

We were drinking wine, but it should have been Fiji Bitter, because Keith-Reid delivered the tangy truth with characteristic Suva bite: 'Everyone around here [the South Pacific] knows that Australia is needed. But that doesn't mean you'll ever be loved.'

If I have a creed for Australia in the islands, that's it, in the words of Robert Keith-Reid. We're needed. The need cuts both ways. We need and want much from the region, just as the region needs much from us. The mutual needs offer a lot to work with.

As ever, the islands know they need us, but it doesn't mean they have to like it, or us—or like their dependence. It's what my grandpa called the 10 quid rule—if you loan a mate 10 quid, he'll

owe you, but he mightn't repay you with mateship. The Labor Party version of this goes: 'Why does he hate my guts? I never did him a favour.'

Australia wants the power and the central place in the South Pacific. Again, the need goes in both directions. We matter and what we do matters greatly. We're always a big target—as we should be, because we want to loom large.

Writing about Australia in the Pacific over five decades, I've often used the line that Australia always presents as the leader, but has trouble getting followers. A demonstration of this—a twin version of the islands conundrum—is the relationship we have with New Zealand. Here is the 10 quid rule writ large.

The Kiwis are our brothers and sisters and often know what we should be doing in the region before we work it out for ourselves. But the push-pull, shove and biff, and slugging and sledging are constants. Again, the Kiwis know they need us but they don't have to like it—or love us. Mutual need provides plenty of the needed glue.

We should expect no more love and devotion from the islands than we get from the Kiwis.

The security calculus tells the story. I jest that there's an envelope in the big safe at the centre of the NZ defence ministry with a single piece of paper giving their fundamental defence strategy: 'To get to us, they have to go by Australia. Take a deep breath, relax, put on your serious voice, and ring Canberra to check what they're doing.'

Works for the islands as well.

Australia's security guarantee to the region doesn't buy much love, because it's a commitment to our interests as well as theirs.

Australia is big enough and strong enough to roll all of that into our role. We had better, because that's the way it is—and we must work to make it continue. We must put ever more breadth and depth and listening into our relationships with New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific—plus Timor-Leste as the start of the arc.

A lot of shared history, along with shared interests and values, should both drive and steady Australian approaches. Time to toughen up and get to work.

The Blue Pacific meets step-up, strategic denial and integration

'The stability and economic progress of Papua New Guinea, other Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste is of fundamental importance to Australia.'

[*Australian foreign policy white paper*](#), 2017^{vii}

'We are more than partners by choice. We are connected as members of a Pacific family. It's why the first leaders I hosted in Australia as prime minister have been from Solomon Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. It's time to open, I believe, a new chapter in relations with our Pacific family. One based on respect, equality and openness. A relationship for its own sake, because it's right. Because it's who we are.'

[*Prime Minister Scott Morrison, 2018*](#) ^{viii}

Australia's deepest, oldest instinct in the South Pacific is strategic denial, striving to exclude other major powers from the region. It wasn't coincidental that the prime minister's 'family' speech, proclaiming a new chapter for Australia in the Pacific, was delivered at a military barracks in Queensland.

As Australia can never achieve complete dominance in the South Pacific, the instinct is beset by a faint, constant ache. Throughout the 20th century, that ache was directed variously at France, Germany and Russia. The ache became a fevered nightmare during the war with Japan.

Today, Australia sees its interests and influence in the South Pacific directly challenged by China.

The challenge rouses the same strategic denial impulse that fostered federation and was expressed in the Commonwealth of Australia's founding document. Our constitution has one clause stating the parliament's power over external affairs, while the next clause identifies authority over the 'relations of the Commonwealth with the islands of the Pacific'. Australia's instinct is formally declared in its constitution.

Australian defence doctrine and foreign policy channel the instinct with two primary propositions:

- Australia has a vital/fundamental interest in the security and stability of the South Pacific
- Australia wants to be the principal security and economic partner of the South Pacific

Greg Fry observes in his new book on power and diplomacy in Pacific regionalism, [*Framing the islands*](#), that Australia's hegemonic agenda has a long history. He quotes a 19th-century observation from Otto von Bismarck about the 'Australasian Monroe doctrine'. ^{ix}

The same sphere-of-influence intent prevails today, Fry writes, as Canberra asserts its leadership and management role: 'Australia's preferred regional order is one in which it is the leading

external security partner to Pacific island states and the undue influence of other metropolitan powers, particularly China, has been denied.’

Australia and New Zealand, he notes, have had ‘enormous influence on Pacific regionalism—on its finances, agenda, policy directions and institutional development’.

Yet, my argument is that Australia is ever the frustrated, edgy hegemon. We face the familiar problem of Oz leadership - generating enough island followership. As Fry puts it, ‘Power as capacity has not easily translated into power as legitimate influence.’

Australia’s influence in the [islands is at times limited](#), and may even be declining. ^x

Our habits and interests bump up against [‘the new Pacific diplomacy’](#), as island leaders project an assertive regional identity and seek to act as ‘a diplomatic bloc promoting a Pacific voice in global arenas’. ^{xi}

Climate change has given Pacific diplomacy a heightened urgency and unity, Fry writes, raising doubts about Australia’s regional membership, much less leadership:

‘In many ways, climate change has become the Pacific’s nuclear testing issue of the twenty-first century; it has brought an urgency and emotional commitment to regional collaboration. Where the Pacific states might in the past have tolerated some frustration with the domination of the regional agenda by Canberra and Wellington to pursue the war on terror or to promote a regional neoliberal economic order, this tolerance reached its limit in relation to the climate change issue.’

Fry says the islands have resisted what he calls ‘coercive’ European-style integration. Since the end of the Cold War, he writes, Australia has been the chief exponent of coercive integration, using the Pacific Islands Forum to push for regional norms to govern island development and governance.

The ‘coercion’ view smashes into Australia’s policy efforts at leadership. partnership and integration; it’s a rendering of Australia as bully, not brother. Refer back to the creed: we loom large and everyone knows we’re needed. But we’ll never be loved – big powers seldom are.

Island perceptions of Australia and how its uses its power will do much to determine the success and reach of the step-up. And Australia’s ambitious offer of economic and security integration. A notable element of Australia’s [2017 foreign policy white paper](#) was its embrace of ‘integration’ as a key objective:

‘The Government is delivering a step-change in our engagement with Pacific island countries. This new approach recognises that more ambitious engagement by Australia, including helping to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security

institutions, is essential to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific. Our partnership with New Zealand will be central to advancing this agenda.'

If step-up is the process and the policy, integration is the aim. We're happy to talk about all the steps, just not the aim—proud of the process, shy about the point.

Australia has a [Voldemort](#) problem with integration: our big new ambition for the South Pacific has become the policy that can't be named. The policy is integration, and we're working to make it happen. We just don't use the i-word – it doesn't appear when Australia's leaders talk about the South Pacific. ^{xii}

Canberra talks constantly of the Pacific step-up, and lots of new steps are being made. Step-up is policy in action. Yet we can't name where the steps are leading. There's a Voldemort-style caution about naming integration as the ultimate step at the top of the ladder, a hesitation on both sides.

Clearly, South Pacific nations are sensitive, even resentful, of any hint that they must cede sovereignty.

Australia is unsure about how far integration should go and how close the ultimate embrace should be. This is classic case of policy evolving and emerging as it goes along.

The basis of the step-up is the reality that integrating Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions is important –essential, I'd argue - to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific.

Economic and security integration asks deep social and political questions of the islands. Australia and New Zealand propose, but it all depends on the island response; they must accept. The South Pacific decides. The weighting of the committee's terms of reference has this exactly right, with its emphasis on the **priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries**.

Underline the linked thought from Australia's foreign policy white paper: the *stability and progress of the region* is of *fundamental importance to Australia*. We act because what the islands need, we need too. Australian creativity and generosity align with Australian interests

The foreign policy white paper referred to the integrate/integration vision six times. The integration ambition is a new ideal—not just neighbours, but joined.

The South Pacific will embrace this cautiously. Integration will be soft and slow, evolving over decades. Several factors combine to make integration a tough topic to talk about:

- [climate change](#)—as [Jenny Hayward-Jones](#) argues, ‘Australia is the principal aid donor and security partner in the region of the world most vulnerable to climate change, but has not exercised leadership on climate change in its diplomatic, aid or security planning’;^{xiii}
- the islands’ pride in their own sovereignty and identity;
- the old ‘neo’ fears—colonialist and/or imperialist—about Australian dominance;
- lack of confidence and trust in Australia on the part of island states, including a perception that Canberra is just panicking about China.

Australia faces the same conundrum that confronted the [Pacific plan](#) for ‘regional cooperation and integration’, proclaimed by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2005 and 2007.^{xiv} [Matthew Dornan](#) noted that the plan had ‘limited impact’ and failed to drive the ‘integration agenda’.^{xv} And with the Pacific Plan, island leaders had actually embraced and endorsed integration – in principle.

The Voldemort problem shows Australia’s struggle with a blunt question from the South Pacific: ‘Why should we integrate with you?’

Australia wants to get closer at a time when its influence is contested. Jenny Hayward-Jones describes the state of play:

‘[O]ver the last five years, as perceptions of Australia’s influence have changed, as China’s visibility has grown, as the climate change threat has worsened and as Pacific island leaders have become more assertive on the public stage, Australia has found its assumptions about the region challenged. For the nation, this marks a new—and more difficult—era of Pacific diplomacy.’^{xvi}

To work, the step-up policy and the integration aim must gain island acceptance. Canberra must win partners. That’s shaped by the leadership Australia offers - and the choices Canberra must make about where it’s aiming to go.

The i-word got an embrace from the secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, [when she came to Canberra and launched](#) Greg Fry’s *Framing the islands*:

‘[C]ontrary to Greg, I don’t think we should be dismissive of opportunities for regional integration in the Pacific, whether they be economic, political or based on something else. I would argue that the [Rarotonga Treaty](#) can be considered as an example of regional integration through which national sovereignty has been transcended [by] delineating a shared ocean space that is subjected to regulatory actions. Therefore, to dismiss ‘coercive integration’ from the beginning as irrelevant to the region would seem to go against the dynamic and contingent approach to regionalism that is the strength of Greg’s conceptual framework.’^{xvii}

Canberra shouldn't read too much into Taylor's endorsement of the possibilities of integration. In my short conversation with her after the launch, she was emphatic that her words implied no embrace of Australia's integration agenda.

In her [Griffith lecture in Brisbane](#), Taylor offered three examples of the 'political strength of the collective', to show what regional resolve and solidarity look like:

- the Rarotonga Treaty, which establishes a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Pacific and was adopted by Pacific leaders in August 1985;
- the Biketawa Declaration, adopted by leaders in 2000, which provided the framework for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI);
- the Pacific's 'instrumental role in concluding what was perhaps the toughest global negotiation ever—the Paris Agreement'.^{xviii}

Australia was central to the nuclear-free zone and RAMSI; the Paris climate negotiations are a different story.

As an example of how Australian strategic instincts can be embraced by the islands, Taylor points to Australia's establishment in 2019 of the [Pacific Fusion Centre](#), bringing together information from across the region on security threats such as illegal fishing, people smuggling and narcotics trafficking.

Taylor says the Fusion Centre is 'region-led and owned', aligning a regional priority with 'the aim of Australia's national foreign policy for stronger security integration across the region'.

Australia's step-up effort to assert its interests, influence and values in the South Pacific must complement – ideally, help complete - the Blue Pacific mantra of 'region-led and owned'.

The islands need integration for their own purposes. It's not just an Australian idea, but a South Pacific need.

The region must adapt and accommodate as it seeks to come together again as a sea of islands — large ocean states that are connected, not isolated and alone.

The islands coming together is about identity, but also the forms and forces of cooperation that can reach towards regional integration. How best can the islands serve the human security needs of their people and the security obligations of their states?

Sovereignty and security are based on strength, not weakness; Australia and New Zealand should be natural sources in building that strength.

Australia is often criticised as swinging between being *in* and *out* of the South Pacific.

Accepting a region-led version of the Pacific future will minimise the attention swings, bolstering Australia's fundamental interests in the stability and economic progress of the arc that runs from Timor-Leste through Papua New Guinea into the islands. Australia and New Zealand can power the Pacific vision.

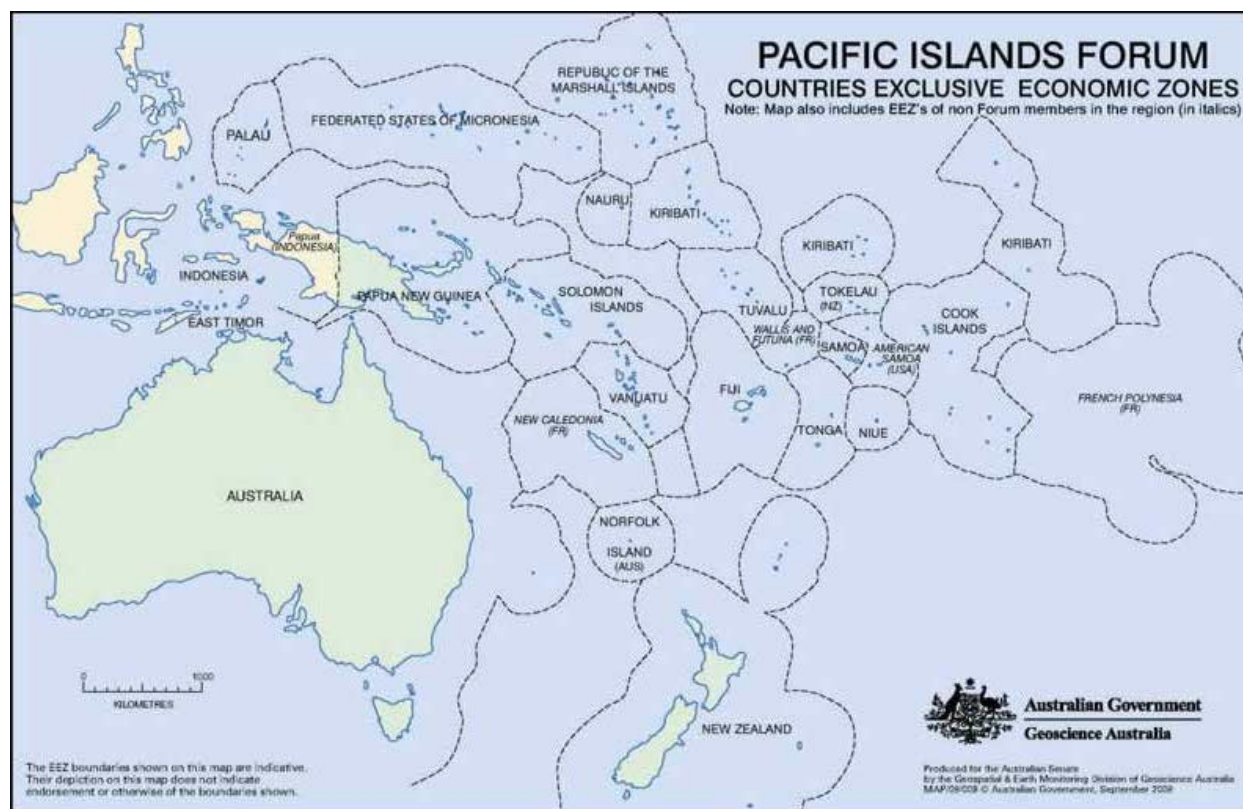
Greg Fry argues that Pacific regionalism is more than an arena for governance, but constitutes a 'regional political community—a term that connotes a deep level of commitment, affiliation and identity beyond the nation-state'.

The instincts of Australia's history can embrace that idea of region.

To hold the South Pacific close, Australia must hold the islands high, and help them to hold together. We must, because, the map of Pacific island maritime boundaries is also the image of a paradigm shift.

This fundamental change in the understandings and imaginings of the islands was delivered by the UN's creation of [200-mile exclusive economic zones](#).

After the 1982 law of the sea convention did its legal magic, the South Pacific transformed from islands in a far sea to a 'sea of islands'.



Older maps of tiny specks in a vast expanse of blue give way to these big nations in a connected Oceania. Truly, new map, new world. The map presents the power of large ocean states, not small islands. That's paradigm-shifting with diplomatic and economic punch, not least in transforming the way islanders understand themselves and their place in the world.^{xix}

Dame Meg Taylor says regionalism is always contested, but the islands have shown 'political savvy and adaptability' in the region they've created:

1. the 'constitution of a strategic political arena for the negotiation of globalisation';
2. the provision of regional governance;
3. building a 'regional political community';
4. and 'the operation of a regional diplomatic bloc'.^{xx}

Greg Fry writes of the puzzle of Pacific regionalism, ranging from security, conflict resolution and fishing to shipping, trade, nuclear issues and the environment:

'The Pacific is invoked sometimes as a regional cultural identity; sometimes as a political community with its own values, norms and practices; sometimes as a collective diplomatic agent; and sometimes as a site of political struggle. Situated between the global arena and local states and societies, it also appears as a mediator of global processes—sometimes as an agent for outside forces and sometimes as a 'shield' for local practices.'

Under the *Old Mates Act*, I declare I've been learning from Greg for decades; he was my teacher 25 years ago when I'd flit from the parliamentary press gallery to the ANU to study international relations. Greg has greatly influenced my thinking on the islands, not least because we so often disagree. We're as one on the importance of the South Pacific; after that the argument begins on meaning and interpretation—and, especially, Australia's role.

Greg is scornful of Oz hegemonic approaches; I tend to ask which big power you'd prefer. If not Oz, then ... ?

As an example, his book tracks the effort by Fiji's Frank Bainimarama to expel Australia from regional membership and eject us from the Forum. My description is that Fiji spent more than a decade as the [revisionist power fighting Australia](#) as the status quo power.^{xxi}

Island leaders rejected Fiji's expulsion campaign, instead endorsing the Australian view (and New Zealand's) that we are *of* and *in* the region. The logic that caused Fiji to call ceasefire and do a rapprochement with Australia is illuminating and promising.

Bainimarama has created a [vuvale \(family\) partnership with Australia](#) for the benefits on offer—and the deeply pragmatic reason that Australia can sometimes be an easier big power to deal with than China.

Vuvale is Suva's offer of a reset and a rebuild with Australia. The *vuvale* opening suggests Bainimarama now sees more value in Australia's Pacific role, the weight we offer in balancing an increasingly complex power contest.

After more than a decade of battle from 2006, the revisionist state decided there was more to be gained from reaching accommodation with the status quo state. Bainimarama didn't suddenly develop affection for Australia, but he knows the needs we can help meet.

The Oz history in the South Pacific is both asset and handicap; they know and remember us much more than we know and remember the islands. When it suits, island leaders can summon that history as the basis for a deep relationship.

Fry's summation of Australian standing is acid but accurate. Australia and New Zealand, he writes, are not emotionally part of the Pacific regional identity (a charge that won't cause heartburn in Canberra but will provoke a lot of Kiwi pushback). Even so, Fry writes, the Oz–Kiwi claim to be part of the Pacific family is accepted:

'In many ways, the Pacific island states retain a surprisingly generous stance towards Canberra and Wellington. They still describe them as 'big brothers' and see them as part of the Pacific 'family', even if they currently feel they are acting as 'bad brothers' and not conducting dialogue within the family in a respectful way. A major contingent factor for the future of Pacific regionalism is therefore the degree to which Australia can overcome the preconceptions that have always flowed from its tendency to see this region as its 'own patch'.'

The 'our patch' line points to Australia's deepest, oldest instinct in the South Pacific.

Now, our region is, equally their patch.

Australia must make its place in the South Pacific working *with* the region.

A core challenge for our 21st century role is to get South Pacific people at the centre of our South Pacific policy.

South Pacific threats and risks, positives and values

Rank the threats, risks and challenges the South Pacific faces. Then, to balance the gloom, see the many qualities and strengths of islanders.

What's most significant? What matters most in the lives of islanders?

Putting things in order of importance appeals to the orderly minds of public servants and the ordering minds of politicians. Journalists have always loved lists (even before clickbaiting became an art form). Ranking must look beyond headlines to define what really matters.

Using headlines, Canberra puts the China challenge near the top. Certainly, the South Pacific is passionate about climate change. Both are in the top five, but neither is on top, in my ordering of the biggest threats, risks and challenges for the South Pacific:

1. Human security and state security
2. Climate change
3. Natural disasters
4. Natural resources
5. China

So, in reverse order ...

5. China: Canberra judges that China wants to become the dominant strategic power in the islands, with military reach and bases to match. This went from a matter of debate to the agreed Canberra consensus about three years ago. As I put it in 2018: 'Australia today sees its strategic interests in the South Pacific [directly challenged by China](#).' ^{xxii}

Not since World War II and the Cold War have the islands been so strategically relevant—and that's a view from the Pacific Islands Forum.^{xxiii}

The region is waking to the China challenge. It's manageable. It has to be, because China offers plenty of upside, as the Australian economy attests.

Canberra worries about China's ability to buy island elites. As the switch of diplomatic recognition by Solomon Islands shows, Beijing can buy a government, but it's harder to [buy a people and a country](#).^{xxiv} China has economic reach but [little soft power](#).^{xxv}

Australia needs to have confidence in our shared history with the South Pacific—the breadth, the depth and the intricate, strong linkages. The islands know how to bargain; they've been dealing with the arrival of big powers for 250 years. China is being judged on its performance and it's not winning everything.

[Kevin Rudd](#) is right to note, 'If we want to be the partner of choice, we need to also acknowledge we are not the only choice of partner.'^{xxvi} China will have a big role. Our aim must be to work with the islands and key institutions to shape that role.

Canberra has dealt itself into China's island game by the creation of the [A\\$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific](#), to be managed by Office of the Pacific within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The high priority list includes telecommunications, energy, transport, water and other essential infrastructure. There's lots of room for China to play, though, with the region needing US\$3.1 billion in investment per year to 2030.

Playing to our strengths and the values of Pacific people can write the script for playing with, not against, China. Important institutions can do much to shape that script: the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Community, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

As the natural regional partner always here to help, Australia's tactic must be more, "Yes, but..." than, 'No way!'

A winning equation reads: China does lots of infrastructure, plus Australia does lots of infrastructure, plus Australia serves Pacific people and the values Australia shares with islanders. Take heart from Professor Richard Herr's conclusion that China's influence is more about economic clout than soft power: '*The admiration that Pacific Island states feel for China is genuine. However, on balance, China's current regional soft power lacks breadth and depth, although it's still evolving.*'^{xxvii}

In responding to China in the region, Australia needs to know the dragon's limits as well as its capabilities.

Australia shouldn't indulge in too much of a lament about losing regional influence in Herr's view: '*The argument that Australia somehow neglected the Pacific Islands and allowed Chinese*

soft-power influence to grow is faulty. It denies the undeniability of China's increase in power and influence globally over recent decades. This debate has already inflicted some harm on Australia's soft power in the region by reviving colonialist imagery of possession and dominance.'

China asserts the same right that it has in East Asia: on strategic, diplomatic or economic questions, China's interests must be respected. The South Pacific is a relatively cheap place to play. Not much money gets China a lot.

The way China talks to the islands is in clearly different to Australia's language. Canberra's emphasis on good governance, economic reform and anti-corruption policies has no counterpart when Beijing comes calling. Pacific politicians contrast the Chinese approach with the demands imposed by Australia – but the values Australia argues for resonate on the streets and in the villages. The values dimension is an important part of putting Pacific people at the centre of our policy.

The South Pacific positives lean towards Australia, not China.

4. Natural resources: A set of assets with risks attached. The islands strive to protect and use their fishery resources. Today, tuna rates as a relative success story, while the tropical forests are a tragedy.

The dwindling, ravaged forests of Melanesia show what happens when extraction becomes exploitation, flavoured by corruption. Logging has been unsustainable and often illegal. Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands are the biggest sources of tropical logs for China. [Global Witness](#) says log exports from the Solomons are more than 19 times a conservative estimate of the annual sustainable harvest.^{xxviii}

Individual nations have done poorly on logging, compared to the collective action of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, which works to manage, monitor and control the [distant-water fleets](#) from China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Logging and fisheries offer lessons and cautions as the islands consider future prospects for exploiting seabed resources.^{xxix}

3. Natural disasters: Islanders are among the most vulnerable in the world to natural disasters.

The 2019 [World Risk Index](#) lists five Pacific island countries among the top 10 most at-risk countries, with Vanuatu ranked first, Tonga third, Solomon Islands fourth, and Papua New Guinea sixth. In the top 20 of the index, Fiji is at 12, Timor-Leste is 15, and Kiribati is 19.^{xxx}

In addition to the force of nature, the index assesses government and society and the ability to respond to emergency: 'The more fragile the infrastructure network, the greater the extent of

extreme poverty and inequality and the worse the access to the public health system, the more susceptible a society is to natural events.’

2. Climate change: A huge threat, but a powerful unifier—something island leaders and their nations can all agree on.

The South Pacific has [securitised](#) climate change as its top security threat. In the words of the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2018 [Boe declaration](#): ‘We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement.’ ^{xxxi}

The Forum’s 2019 [declaration](#) was even louder on the threat to the survival of the Blue Pacific:

‘Right now, climate change and disasters are impacting all our countries. Our seas are rising, oceans are warming, and extreme events such as cyclones and typhoons, flooding, drought and king tides are frequently more intense, inflicting damage and destruction to our communities and ecosystems and putting the health of our peoples at risk.’ ^{xxxii}

Accepting the force of those statements, how is this only at number two? The answer is to see the hierarchy in terms of power and responsibility.

Island leaders can unite and campaign on climate change because, as an old pop song puts it, they’re [Not responsible](#).

Island leaders certainly aren’t responsible for global warming. Talking about the danger unites nations and puts leaders on the diplomatic offensive. Yet it’s a way for leaders not to talk about their core responsibility to deal with the greatest challenge facing the islands—the needs of their own people.

The ordering offered by the forum’s Boe declaration has a big ‘not responsible’ flavour. The first two points of the declaration are about climate change and the dynamic geopolitics of ‘an increasingly crowded and complex region’.

The third point in the Boe document is where the leaders step forward to claim ‘stewardship’ of the Blue Pacific. Not until point 7 of the declaration does an expanded concept of security arrive. Even then, human security is discussed in terms of outside ‘humanitarian assistance, to protect the rights, health and prosperity of Pacific people’. It’s an indirect way to discuss the biggest threat, which is also the major responsibility.

1. Human security and state security: In all its forms—social, health, economic and political—the security of the islands and their peoples is merging with traditional security threats.

The islands are strong societies with weak governments. The societies stretch and strain while the governments get no stronger.

The traditional stabilisers of village, clan and religion are shaken. The challenges of modernisation come from outside and inside.

It's flip, but more than alliteration, to say South Pacific cities are as challenged by sewerage as they are by sea level. The ocean tide coming in matches the tide of those leaving the villages for Pacific towns and cities. The islands grapple with urbanisation.

Health problems abound. [Colin Tukuitonga](#)—a doctor from Nuie who was [head of the Pacific Community](#) from 2014 until recently— talks of 'dual crises', the climate crisis is matched by the health crisis:

'Noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease cause three out of four deaths in the Pacific. These conditions are fuelled by a pipeline of risk factors such as high levels of smoking, unhealthy diets and reduced levels of physical activity. These conditions cause considerable personal costs such as blindness and kidney and heart failure.'^{xxxiii}

In the South Pacific country most important to Australia, Papua New Guinea, Covid-19 adds to PNG's '[economic, fiscal and social crisis](#)'.^{xxxiv}

The islands have the youth bulge that brings revolutions. Australia worries quietly about a breakdown of state legitimacy and capacity among the neighbours.

Thinking about likely flashpoints in the manner of the Australian military, Professor [John Blaxland](#) offers a crisis scorecard for the coming decade, with 10 being the highest probability. Bougainville's quest for independence from PNG is an 8. The prospect of a breakdown in law and order in the island arc, as happened in Timor-Leste and Tonga in 2006, and repeatedly in Solomon Islands in the last two decades, is also an 8.^{xxxv}

The Covid-19 pandemic shapes as a diabolical stress-test for health systems and the stability of island states. The Vanuatu-based journalist Dan McGarry says the 'chronically fragile economies' of the islands face massive disruption: *'The nations of the Pacific not only have to fight an unprecedented public health threat; the majority have to retool their entire economies. It will be a difficult transition, fraught with risks. If the Pacific island countries are starved of the resources they need, they may collapse.'*^{xxxvi}

A fact that lives in plain view: as far out as anyone can see, South Pacific states will be dependent on aid. The Island catch-22 is the 'paradox of relatively high per capita levels of aid and low rates of economic growth'—the [Pacific limits to growth](#).^{xxxvii} In the Pacific, real average income per capita has increased by less than 10 per cent since 1990 compared with about 150 per cent in Asia's emerging market economies.^{xxxviii} Aid policy is economic policy for the South Pacific: relationships with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, the US and the EU pay for government and run services.

Whenever I talk about the threats facing the South Pacific, I try to balance what could be a dire dirge by pointing to all the positives the region offers. The peoples of the South Pacific – inhabiting an environment which can be as harsh as it's beautiful - constitute true nations. The island nations have clear identities of culture, language, ethnicity and history – offering much to admire and learn from.

The islands have strong societies -even though their states are weak – and made the smoothest transition from colony to independence of any region. South Pacific states have been able to transplant and grow Western democratic forms - a better collective record than anywhere else in the developing world. Fiji proves the power of the Pacific's democratic norm by clawing its way back to elections from its military coups.

Pacific democracy is beset by 'big man' politics and corruption, but democracy reigns across the region – often rough, yet admirably robust. The next challenge is for Pacific women to get their share of political power.

Now consider the positives that are central to Pacific life. The islands are Christian with relatively conservative societies that are English-speaking, pro-Western and pro-capitalist. Apart from English as the lingua franca, the French territories of Polynesia, New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands also tick those boxes.

The flippant version of all this is that Australia embraces the place everybody else in the world wants to visit on holiday. The Lucky Country lucks out again – we get to do institution building in paradise, right next door.

The serious version is to add up all those positives: strong societies, wonderful cultures, democratic, Christian, pro-Western and conservative.

Canberra's must accentuate those Pacific positives, to work with what's natural in the islands. The South Pacific asks us to help build on our own values. Australia's must put Pacific people at the centre of our policy, embracing our role in realising to the full the future of Pacific community.

Pacific people and Pacific community

Cyclone [Harold](#) crashed through the South Pacific. Covid-19 creeps towards the islands. China contends. The [pandemic](#) and the aftermath of Cyclone Harold constitute the immediate crisis. China is a long-term test of power and governance in the islands. The issues of human and state security run through all dimensions.

Australia faces core questions about its interests, influence and values in the South Pacific. My single most important suggestion: Australia must put Pacific people at the centre of its South Pacific policy. And Melanesia must drive and define our policy.

The idea seems simple and obvious, a policy prescription worthy of a sarcastic, 'Duh—brilliant, Sherlock!'

Yet Australia struggles with the people dimension of its Pacific policy.

Canberra has strong thoughts about aid, geopolitics and geoeconomics in the islands. 'The Pacific is our home,' observes [Australia's Defence Department](#) in its submission to this inquiry, and this 'deep and enduring relationship' aims to 'build a region that is strategically secure, economically stable and politically sovereign'. It's a crowded canvas, and that crammed agenda can obscure rather than highlight the Pacific people who should be in the middle of the picture.

A telling illustration of the people point: there aren't many islanders in Australia from the Melanesian/Australian arc.

Contradicting geography, Australia's population has more Polynesians than Melanesians. Few Melanesians come to Australia to visit or settle, while Polynesians can enter and settle in Australia, coming in easily via New Zealand. Polynesian countries have migration access to New Zealand and Australia has an open border with New Zealand.

The Kiwis have done us a great, indirect favour. Still, it's strange that New Zealand drives the people dimension of our Pacific policy and which Pacific people live in Oz. The former diplomat [James Batley](#) notes that the Pacific islands population in Australia—around 200,000 people—is heavily dominated by Polynesian communities:

Our nearest Melanesian neighbours—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—are seriously under-represented. It's a surprising fact that, according to the census, in 2016 more people in Australia claimed Cook Islands ancestry (over 22,000) than claimed ancestry from PNG (under 19,000), particularly given that PNG's population is around 500 times the size of the Cook Islands'.^{xxxix}

Here are the figures from Australia's census in 2006, 2011 and 2016:

	2006	2011	2016	Growth 2006–2016
New Caledonian	246	203	270	10%
Ni-Vanuatu	514	704	956	86%
Papua New Guinean	12549	15459	18802	50%
Solomon Islander	1118	1406	1883	68%
Melanesian and Papuan, not elsewhere classified	362	526	96	-73%
Melanesian and Papuan, not further defined	459	646	1099	139%
Melanesia total	15248	18944	23106	52%
i-Kiribati	483	682	871	80%
Nauruan	376	416	512	36%
Micronesian, not elsewhere classified	150	136	166	11%
Micronesian, not further defined	98	99	110	12%
Micronesia total	1107	1333	1659	50%
Cook Islander	11400	16191	22228	95%
Fijian	19171	23769	37003	93%
Niuean	2182	3142	4958	127%
Samoa	39997	55837	75753	89%
Tongan	18426	25096	32695	77%
Hawaiian	276	333	473	71%
Tahitian	685	722	1311	91%
Tokelauan	1139	1659	2329	104%
Tuvaluan	334	433	703	110%
Pitcairn	—	—	741	—
Polynesian, not elsewhere classified	485	443	529	9%
Polynesian, not further defined	1690	2167	3168	87%
Polynesia total	95785	129792	181891	90%
Total	112140	150069	206656	84%

Source: James Batley using ABS categories^{xl}

The absence of Melanesian in Australia doesn't reflect the Pacific: Melanesia has around 10 million people compared to less than 700,000 for Polynesia.

All other dimensions of Australia's Pacific policy have Melanesia at their core; that's why Melanesia, naturally, gets the great bulk of our aid. We live in the South Pacific, but not many of our immediate neighbours live here. Putting Pacific people at the centre of our policy will mean more islanders here, and they must come from our island arc.

The Melanesian arc is also Australia's arc, the islands that frame our Pacific policy as well as our geography.

Using the phrase 'Australia's arc' means that the sweep of policy and geography starts in Timor-Leste, then swings through Papua New Guinea (and Bougainville), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. Here is where most islanders live. Here are the countries that are most likely to face problems of political stability and human security.

My hierarchy of threats, risks and challenges in the South Pacific is an Australia view, deeply flavoured by Melanesia.

In building Pacific policy over the past 60 years, there've been only two occasions when Canberra had big thoughts about getting islanders into Australia.

In 1966, federal cabinet considered a submission on the future of the Australian-administered territory Papua New Guinea. An option that was canvassed was statehood for PNG within Australia's federation. The submission dismissed the idea of making PNG the seventh state as 'impracticable'. But it noted that cabinet had never 'made a decision on Australia's position in relation to the ultimate status of PNG'.^{xli}

In 1968, the Oz territories minister was still musing on PNG as a 'seventh state' as a convenient way of referring to a close association with Australia without implying total integration (there's that word 'integration' again). The winds of change that'd blown through Africa and Asia seemed a gentle zephyr when Canberra looked at PNG; the illusion persisted that Australia still had decades in the territory. Reality arrived in a hurry. Decolonisation came with the tropical winds as PNG became independent in 1975.

Our Pacific policy became about diplomacy, defence and aid—not the people who were the responsibility of these newly independent nations.

Australia's welcome move to a non-discriminatory immigration policy meant we'd do nothing to discriminate in favour of the islands. Special access to Oz for Pacific workers became a [taboo topic in Canberra](#). When the Pacific Islands Forum was being [created in the early 1970s](#), Australia feared that the new regional body would be used to attack our migration policies, and worked hard to impose the taboo.

The second big rethink on people policy evolved over the past decade as Australia inched open the door for Pacific workers. The Pacific people are coming temporarily, but now they're coming. Score this a major achievement of island leaders, working through the Forum, to change Australian thinking and dismantle the taboo.

The Australian pilot scheme for Pacific seasonal workers announced in 2008 (following New Zealand's lead) was made permanent in 2012 as the [Seasonal Worker Programme](#).

By 2018, Australia added on the [Pacific Labour Scheme](#) and opened it to all the islands, a decision that meant—at last—people from PNG have a chance to work in Oz. This was Australia listening to the islands and acting for Pacific people.

The presence of islanders in Australia under the seasonal worker and Pacific labour schemes has become part of the Covid-19 story. On April 4, Australia [announced](#) that visas for island workers will be extended for up to 12 months: 'We want to assure our Pacific neighbours that Australia stands with them during this crisis and we are doing all we can to support Pacific workers in Australia.'

Australia speaks easily of our 'home' and our 'neighbours'. And Prime Minister Scott Morrison's use of the term ['Pacific family' is, in my view, goddamn genius.](#) ^{xlii}

Acting on the language of home, neighbours and family means putting Pacific people at the centre of our Pacific policy. Canberra's job is to accentuate the many Pacific positives, to work with what's natural in the islands. Strengthen the strong societies and reinforce the weak states.

The six reviews and inquiries Australia is conducting on the South Pacific will build on long history and deep policy knowledge. It's significant and greatly heartening – getting the focus right – that two of Parliament's inquiries are about Pacific people: the [human rights of women and girls in the Pacific](#) and [strengthening relationships](#) via the Pacific diasporas, ensuring the step-up reflects 'the priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries'.

Australia, surely, is set to abandon the budget trajectory of the past five years that saw deep cuts in foreign assistance. Time to start pumping lots more money into aid, showcasing Canberra's recent amazing ability for screeching policy turns, junking long-held views.

An aid U-turn and lots more bucks for the South Pacific is a big policy shift; yet the really hard part will be philosophy and focus. This is where putting Pacific people at the very heart of policy matters.

Australia has a proud history in helping the islands with health and education. Time to power up that history and do much, much more. More money. More focus. More people. The story Covid-19 is telling about island health systems has a sad parallel in education – especially in Melanesia.

When Australia talks of family, partnership and neighbourhood, it's talking the language of community.

South Pacific regionalism has already delivered a sense of community. The ultimate steps of our step-up – still not even in view – will be the shift from community to Community. As with the current elements of the step-up, such a community-to-Community shift will happen only when the islands – and New Zealand – are ready.

We will be a small-c community for a long time yet. A step-up that has a steady and central focus on Pacific people, however, will drive the logic of integration. The offer is community not colonisation.

Australia and New Zealand are central to an economic, political and security community—and will carry the cost—but much of the heart and soul will come from PNG and the other members of the Pacific Islands Forum. And in this rendering of the ‘islands’, Timor-Leste has to belong.

At its most ambitious, the community would have a common currency based on the Australian dollar, a common labour market, and common budgetary and fiscal standards. This most ambitious community model was discussed in detail by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee in its 2003 report, *A Pacific engaged*, which included its vision of a ‘Pacific economic and political community’.^{xliii} Here’s the committee’s central idea:

Recommendation 1: That the idea of a Pacific economic and political community which recognises and values the cultural diversity in the region, and the independent nations within it, and takes into account differing levels of growth and development, is worthy of further research, analysis and debate. Such a community should be based on the objectives of:

- sustainable economic growth for the region;
- a democratic and ethical governance;
- shared and balanced defence and security arrangements;
- common legal provisions and commitment to fight crime;
- priority health, welfare and educational goals;
- recognition of and action for improved environmental standards; and
- recognition of mutual responsibility and obligations between member countries of the community.

Over time, such a community would involve establishing a common currency, preferably based on the Australian dollar. It would also involve a common labour market and common budgetary and fiscal standards.

I’m proud to have a copy of that report, signed by the committee chairman, Senator Peter Cook, with this comment: ‘To Graeme, you are in part to blame for the main recommendation.’

My submission to that Senate inquiry certainly called for a grand vision of community, but it also argued that community creation isn’t merely Australia offering favours—it’s a core expression of Australia’s interests and history and strategic needs. There’s always a lot in it for us, just as there is for the Pacific peoples and states.

The other part of that submission was a discussion of the then taboo topic of Pacific labour mobility. So one bit of the grand vision has arrived.

The discussion of a big-C Community has been given a boost by Biman Chand Prasad, a former Professor of Economics and Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of the South Pacific, now leader of Fiji's National Federation Party.

He writes that the COVID-19 crisis calls for a rethink of regionalism and integration, to enhance the region's economies and 'strengthen geopolitical and strategic alliances and interests'.^{xliv} Prasaad says the pandemic is a chance for the region 'to reset, step-up, and re-model' their relationships:

'Unfortunately, some Pacific island leaders have found it convenient to bash Australia and New Zealand on issues of climate change and sovereignty. Some Pacific islands also find Australia and New Zealand irritants when it comes to their own poor record on democracy, good governance and human rights. Some even went to the extent of wanting Australia and New Zealand out of the Forum. However, there is little doubt that the future of the Pacific countries lies with a deeper and more meaningful integration with our old and trusted allies, Australia and New Zealand.'

'On their part, these two countries have to realise that investment in, and deeper integration with, Pacific island countries would be mutually beneficial. The ties can be facilitated through an Australia and New Zealand and Pacific island Community. It could possibly include a Pacific Parliament, to achieve not just fuller and deeper economic integration but some political integration as well.'

'Implementation will not be easy. There will be concerns about loss of sovereignty. All leaders, however, should prioritise a better quality of life for their people above the loss of some elements of their sovereignty.'

Sovereignty and independence are based on strength, not weakness. The integration offer is about helping the islands build their future, not binding their options.

In talking to islanders about integration, I've been struck by how my strongest line hasn't been Australia's good intentions but the example of New Zealand.

New Zealand will be central in setting the ambition and the limits of integration. Wellington must play the special role it claims for itself in the Pacific as the essential Kiwi.

New Zealand knows all the benefits of alliance with Australia, and free movement of goods, services and people. New Zealand has been integrating with Australia for 200 years, yet the embrace of the Kangaroo has never hurt Kiwi identity or sovereignty (or changed the way they do their vowels).

New Zealand is proudly itself, while prospering from the community it shares with the Kangaroo. The Kiwi integration experience is a positive model for a Pacific community. If the Kiwis can do it, so can the rest of the South Pacific.

Too often, New Zealand's perspective seems to be that Australia's integration call doesn't show enough understanding of the sovereignty and identity of the islands. This is a classic Kiwi effort at walking both sides of the street. New Zealand identifies as a South Pacific state while also drawing all the benefits of being Australia's de facto seventh state.

Being integrated with Australia does no harm to New Zealand's admirable sense of self. The essential Kiwi example shows the South Pacific how much more can be achieved through integration.

Integration is difficult and detailed policy; family is warm and embracing. Scott Morrison's use of the Pacific family helps put people into the policy. Even Australia's great foe in the South Pacific over the past decade, Fiji's Frank Bainimarama, is happy to embrace Morrison and family, a development that's as promising as it's surprising.^{xlv}

The family imagining offers much for the journey Australia and islands must do together. The people dimension is about our values meeting the values and needs of the diverse members of the South Pacific family.

Family is the badge for the step-up, complementing New Zealand's Pacific ['reset'](#).

Integration rests on a simple, obvious idea: a stronger South Pacific is in Australia's interests. Secure, stable island nations are better able to serve their own interests and identities. It's not contradictory to say that those South Pacific interests and identities will be helped by getting closer to Australia and New Zealand.

Canberra needs to offer its vision for the South Pacific community and outline what we'll do to build that community. Australia's South Pacific conversation is about the islanders, and also about ourselves and where we live.

The language of family and partnership and neighbourhood - centred on South Pacific people - can drive practical integration to go from South Pacific community to Pacific Community.

The need for South Pacific journalism

Journalism has always been a tough trade in the South Pacific. Living and working in island communities exposes editors and reporters to unusual political, personal and professional pressures.^{xlvi}

One change these days is that Pacific journalists can't rely as they once could on the coverage and support of Australian media and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

An irony of Australia's policy step-up in the South Pacific is how much Oz media has stepped down. As the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) marked the 80th birthday of its international service, Radio Australia, a sad celebration footnote was that Australia's mothballed shortwave-radio site was in the process of being sold.

[As Jemima Garrett](#) writes, there's no doubt that, for Australia, China's growing influence is the story of the decade. But, with so few Australian journalists based in the region, even significant developments in the China story are going unreported:

'The level of understanding and knowledge in Australia about the Pacific is staggeringly low. While there has been a significant uptick in Australian media interest in the region recently, its almost single-minded focus on China is not helping improve that understanding and is aggravating Pacific leaders who want to see Pacific voices and a wider agenda make more of an impact in Australia.' ^{xlvi}

A statement warning about '[growing threats to media freedom](#)' from the [Melanesia Media Freedom Forum](#), representing journalists from Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and West Papua, said the 'global decline of democracy is making it easier for our governments to silence the media'; misinformation, propaganda and fake news are growing problems; and social media is an 'existential threat', undermining the budget and role of Melanesian media companies. ^{xlvi}

The Media Forum called for a better understanding of the role of journalism in the functioning and accountability of Melanesian democracies:

'The range of threats to media freedom is increasing. These include restrictive legislation, intimidation, political threats, legal threats and prosecutions, assaults and police and military brutality, illegal detention, online abuse, racism between ethnic groups and the ever-present threats facing particularly younger and female reporters who may face violence both on the job and within their own homes.'

Since the ABC [closed its shortwave service](#) in January 2017, half of the Pacific Islands Forum countries now hear nothing from Radio Australia.

Killing shortwave disenfranchised an unknown number of listeners. As broadcasting policy, it was highly questionable. As strategy, it was dumb—a distressing example of Oz amnesia about its South Pacific role.

Hard news and free media should be the sharp edge of Australian soft power in the South Pacific.
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The symbolism of turning off Australia's voice to the islands was appalling. As South Pacific leaders protested that shortwave was still an invaluable service, the transmitters went silent – a sad example of not listening to what the South Pacific is saying.

The decline of Australian international broadcasting – in both cash and reach terms – is one of the untold stories of our strategic debate over the last decade. In a decade, Australia has slashed its spending on its international voice by two-thirds. In no other area of Australian international policy have resources fallen so markedly, with such little discussion in the policy community.

Twin failures delivered lousy policy. Canberra wasn't paying attention and the ABC was unable to meet the international dimension of its charter. Both failures hurt the South Pacific and Australia's regional interests.

Australia has ceased using media power to play an intelligent and effective part in the affairs of our region. For the first time, New Zealand is more important than Australia in doing regional reporting for and with the South Pacific.

Time to reverse a silly desertion of a vital arena, to speak for ourselves, to get back into the journalism contest.

As Australia ponders its interests, influence and values in the South Pacific, it must look anew at the central role of free media. Australia gropes and stutters towards a renewed embrace of international broadcasting—the vital need expressed by Robert Menzies in 1939 when he launched Australia's shortwave serve: 'The time has come to speak for ourselves.' Today's times demand an equally strong Australian voice.

The latest lurch towards understanding is the silent release of the [review of Australia's media reach in the Asia-Pacific](#).¹ Note the irony that a report on broadcasting was soundless on arrival. The review was completed in December, 2018, but only released ([published on the Department of Communications website](#)) on 17 October. No announcement. No government decisions.

Behold a classic [orphan inquiry](#), not wanted by either the government or the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, nor particularly desired by the public service. The orphan was created as part of the price to win a Senate vote, and was dumped on the public doorstep without a word of welcome.^{li}

The inquiry matters because it nods towards significant policy failure and the absent-minded trashing of Australian international broadcasting.

The answers offered are hesitant, sometimes implicit. The report is useful for what it does and doesn't say. The tough stuff is often dealt with by quoting from the 433 submissions. Thus, see the key themes highlighted from submissions as implicit findings, reaching toward tacit recommendations:

- Media markets across the Asia-Pacific exhibit significant variation and a 'highly competitive nature'. Dramatically changing historical patterns of media usage requires 'narrowcasting' that tailors content and distribution platforms to target audiences in each country.
- Successive budget cutbacks have 'caused reductions in Australia's supplies of international broadcasting services, particularly to the Pacific'. International services should be revitalised, including the use of 'alternative models for delivery and governance of Australian government funded international broadcasting services'.
- 'The majority of submissions, which focused on the Pacific, advocated the restoration of ABC's shortwave services in the Pacific region.'
- Submissions in favour of restoring shortwave services 'disputed the views that the technology has "limited and diminishing audiences" and disproportionately high costs'.

The inquiry doesn't advocate restoring shortwave, but nor does it endorse policy dumbness. Instead, it offers this:

'In the absence of a clear statement of the objectives of Australia's Asia Pacific broadcasts ... and a clear articulation of the full range of alternative options for achieving those objectives, it is not possible to determine whether Australia would derive a net benefit from resuming its shortwave broadcasts to the Asia Pacific.'

You might have thought the combined forces of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Communications could have reached towards a clear statement of objectives and a full range of options. But that'd be to misunderstand the lonely nature of the orphan inquiry and Canberra's sins of omission and commission.

The decade of vandalism inflicted on international broadcasting forced the review back to first principles: Australia must identify its 'strategic policy objectives' and clarify 'the role that publicly funded broadcasts should play in achieving those objectives'.

Policy has gone astray in the foothills when the key recommendation of a government review is that the government must first define what it wants to do. Canberra is still groping and stuttering

towards 'clarifying the objectives of Australia's broadcasting to audiences in Asia and the Pacific'.

Clarify our interests in our region? Define our foreign policy and strategic objectives? Tough times demand much better than this.

The broadcast review suffered from a fuzzy geographic frame and calculated the benefits of shortwave only in economic terms.^{lii} Yet even on the money, the report found that in the decade before closure, Australia had 'derived \$40.3 million of net benefits from its shortwave broadcasts to the Asia Pacific region'.

So, ending shortwave hurt the national pocket as well as foreign policy.

The chair of the ABC, Ita Buttrose, a fine editor and journalist, knows that much international ground needs to be retaken. Her [2019 Lowy Institute media lecture](#) was notable for notes of loss and regret.^{liii} The ABC continues to produce content in languages other than English, Buttrose said, 'but regrettably, not at the same levels as we have been able to in the past'. The ABC's declining commitment to international broadcasting, she said, hurt Australia at many levels:

'Australia's relationship with our neighbours is more nuanced than ever, and so, naturally, must be our conversations. This type of engagement requires a high degree of expertise, investment, infrastructure, and above all commitment.'

'Commitment and cash have both ebbed and the conversation has suffered. It's a sad commentary as the ABC prepares to celebrate next month the [80th anniversary](#) of the creation of Radio Australia (the outbreak of World War II was something of a prompt).'

Facing harder international times, Australia should re-commit to international broadcasting as a key policy instrument. We need a powerful and credible media voice, to rejoin regional conversations and contests. Australia should make a major new commitment to public broadcasting in our neighbourhood.

Australia frets about threats to the rules-based system as the tectonic plates of geopolitics and geoeconomics crunch. The wrack and roil afflicting the international system matches the digital disruption of news media. The rules and norms of the foreign policy game and media world shake.

Traditionally, Australia wanted a strong broadcasting voice in what defence-speak calls our region of primary strategic interest: Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and the eastern Indian Ocean.

Geography is back. Or, more accurately, the demands of geography never went away - we're just feeling the weight with fresh force.

In the foreign-policy game, the word 'influence' stands besides 'interests', at the calculating, cerebral end of the field; yet influence and interests must always be within shouting distance of values and beliefs, which tend to reside in the heart and hearth part of the arena.

The words that describe good journalism—'reliable', 'independent', 'factual'—are exactly the same things needed in the foreign policy of a country seeking to persuade others, protect interests, project influence and promote values.

Trouble is, Canberra has to rediscover the value of independent media as a foreign policy instrument. And the ABC has to confront its failure to meet the international dimensions of its charter.

To resolve the domestic-international tensions at the heart of the charter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a new Australian International Broadcasting Corporation (AIBC) should be created.

In the digital age, the AIBC could as easily be called the Australian International Media Corporation, but it's more than habit and sentiment to keep 'Broadcasting' in the title; over 80 years, the ABC's reputation and strong international brand has been built on the independence and accuracy of its reporting. In the age of fake news and digital disruption, that reputation is a great national asset.

To be clear, 'broadcasting' is a catchall covering a lot of ground: analogue to digital to satellite, from Facebook to FM. Content converges: radio and TV become video and audio and text. Broadcasting is publishing. TV and radio are reborn online. The digital age both unites and atomises.

A renewed Australian focus on international broadcasting - in its broadest, converging-media sense - will be built on a government rethink about the importance of journalism to our Asia-Pacific interests.

The AIBC should be born of the ABC, reflect ABC traditions and standards, draw on ABC resources – but the AIBC must have its own corporate identity as an expression of its distinct, international purpose.

The AIBC would have its own chair and board and its own separate budget.

The deputy chair of the ABC and the ABC managing-director should be on the board of the AIBC, but so should the head of the Special Broadcasting Corporation.

Replicate the successful ABC model with a staff-elected board member, and then gather board members with international experience from business, diplomacy, aid, and one of the major generators of Oz soft power in the years ahead, the universities.

Under its Act, the ABC can establish subsidiary companies, so in theory no new legislation is required.

But in line with my argument that Canberra must pay for what Canberra wants, the AIBC must have its own budget allocation. Don't leave it to the ABC. Aunty can't pay for what Australian foreign policy demands.

The AIBC must have a separate identity so the international effort doesn't get drawn into the domestic fights that are a natural part of the ABC's existence.

Like the ABC, the AIBC must be a fully funded, independent public broadcaster – not a state broadcaster.

Give the AIBC the right to seek partners where it sees a natural fit in such realms as development aid, philanthropy and universities – its core, though, is as a public broadcaster.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking Australia can have an important foreign policy instrument on the cheap.

If AIBC is going to have heft, it must be richly funded by Canberra; at least rich in the way journalists think (the hack version of cornucopia is Defence's coffee money or a few days of the aid budget).

The ABC doesn't have a lazy \$30 million to redirect to Oz foreign policy, much less \$50 million or \$75 million.

Canberra has to see the need and fund the instrument. The ABC is the model, but a specific instrument must be created: the Australian International Broadcasting Corporation.

Australian interests influence and values demand a strong Australian voice in the South Pacific and the broader Asia-Pacific.

I am a member of the Australian Asia Pacific Media Initiative (AAMI) and I am a signatory to the submission that AAMI has made to this inquiry.

I haven't repeated the excellent, detailed work in the AAMI submission. I point, especially to AAMI's discussion of the money needed to remake Australia's international media voice.

The dollars tell much of the sad story.

In 2010, Australia spent \$36 million dollars annually on international broadcasting including transmission costs. In today's dollars, adjusted for CPI, this is the equivalent of \$43 million.

In 2020, Australia expects to spend far less internationally: \$11 million via funding for the ABC and approximately \$5.7 million via FreeTV Australia.

In a decade, the money Australia spends on its international media voice has been cut by two-thirds. We retreated at the same time that the South Pacific and Asia became more complex, crowded and demanding.

Australia has degraded a high quality and highly effective instrument of foreign policy. Getting back into the game would be relatively cheap. The three options AAMI offers for remaking our international voice are great value for money. I commend AAMI's three funding models to the inquiry

- 1) **Full Asia-Pacific television, radio and digital services \$55-\$75 million per annum** (including current funding). This option would significantly enhance services in the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia, near neighbours among the developing nations of ASEAN and Mandarin-speakers globally, including in Australia. At its most effective (with a budget around \$75 million), this option could include tailor-made services for audiences in India. This option would include a wide range of programs made specifically for Asia-Pacific audiences with priority on news and current affairs (including arts, business, sport, science and technology), new English language-learning programs and children's programs. In any of these options news and current affairs would meet all the ABC's rigorous guidelines for independence. This option would enable the rebuilding of audiences in Asia and the Pacific and see Australia achieve its soft power goals by reestablishing a significant voice in the region.
- 2) **Budget Asia-Pacific television radio and digital services \$40-\$55 million** This option would enhance services in the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Services for near-neighbour developing nations of ASEAN and China would be enhanced but without as much bespoke programming for audiences in each country as noted in option 1. Bespoke services for India would be beyond the range of this option. Considering the requirement for more streaming, mobile and online services in 2020 and beyond, satellite delivery of television would probably not be an option under this scenario.
- 3) **Television, radio and digital in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia \$35-\$50 million per annum.** This option would provide for significantly enhanced radio and television content and access to digital platforms and transmission in the countries identified as priorities in the 2016 Defence White Paper i.e. PNG, the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia. At its upper funding-level this option would provide services of a standard similar to Option 1 (above) but over a more limited geographic area. At its lower funding-level it would provide services at slightly lower level to Option 2. Funding for this option recognises that establishment costs do not scale proportionately

with the geography covered by the service as maintaining services in the Pacific is comparatively costly

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ The six Canberra inquiries are:

(1) The Defence Department [review](#) of defence strategy and capabilities. In the ways of Defence, the demands of Australia's geography mean the South Pacific is central to the strategic pondering.

(2) The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is conducting its inquiry on a '[new international development policy](#)' to support 'security, stability, prosperity and resilience in the Indo-Pacific'. As with defence, Pacific calculations are crucial in foreign policy; the islands will continue to get the biggest share of our aid.

Parliament's Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is holding four separate step-up inquiries:

(3) [Australia's defence relationships with Pacific island nations](#)—looking at Defence's activities; the 'needs, requests and feedback' from the islands; the level of coordination between Defence and the rest of Canberra; the chances for cooperation with 'other nations seeking to invest and engage in the South West Pacific'.

(4) [Activating greater trade and investment with Pacific islands](#)—focusing on the potential of the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations ([PACER Plus](#)); the chances and barriers for 'trade, investment, aid for trade and employment links'; 'the views, norms and cultural practices' on trade and investment in Australia and the islands and 'how differences can be accommodated'.

(5) [Human rights of women and girls in the Pacific](#)—covering the role of island civil-society groups in gender equality and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence; the key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific and how Australia can help.

(6) [Strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific](#)—examining the implementation of Australia's step-up as a whole-of-government effort; the prospects for broadening non-government and community-based linkages to leverage the Pacific diaspora; measures to ensure the step-up reflects 'the priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries'.

ⁱⁱ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Stepping up Australia's engagement with our Pacific family'. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/Pages/stepping-up-australias-pacific-engagement>

ⁱⁱⁱ Graeme Dobell, 'The South Pacific: policy taboos, popular amnesia and political failure', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, Volume 18, Number 1, 2003. From a paper was originally presented as part of the Menzies Research Centre Lecture Series: Australian Security in the 21st Century. <http://devpolicy.org/PEB/2019/06/08/the-south-pacific-policy-taboos-popular-amnesia-and-political-failure/>

^{iv} The judgements in this paragraph are drawn from Tess Newton Cain in 'The State of the Step-up'. in *2019 State of the Neighbourhood*, Griffith University. https://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/901911/W5-Newton-Cain-Ch4-WEB.pdf

^v Dr Tess Newton Cain, Dr James Cox & Dr Geir Henning Presterudsten, 'Pacific Perspectives on the World', *Peaceifica & The Whitlam Institute*, February, 2020. <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2020/2/13/pacific-perspectives-on-the-world>

vi Graeme Dobell, 'The strange saga of Speight's siege in Suva', Chapter 22 in *Coup: reflections on the political crisis in Fiji*, (ed) Brij Lal & Michael Pretes ANU Press, 2008.
<http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p97751/pdf/ch22.pdf>

vii Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper: Opportunity, Security, Strength*. Canberra, 2017. P.99.

viii Scott Morrison, *Australia and the Pacific: a new chapter*, Address by the Prime Minister, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, Qld., November 8, 2018.
<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter>

ix Greg Fry, *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*, ANU Press, 2019.
<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/pacific/framing-islands>

x Joanne Wallis, 'Do Australia's interests match its influence in the Pacific islands?' *The Strategist*, September 27, 2017.
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/do-australias-interests-match-its-influence-in-the-pacific-islands/> See Joanne's fine book: *Pacific power? Australia's strategy in the Pacific islands*, MUP, 2017.

On the waning influence question, see also: Jenny Hayward-Jones, 'Why is Australia's Pacific influence waning', *Australian Foreign Affairs: our sphere of influence, rivalry in the Pacific*, AFA6, July, 2019.
<https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/extract/2019/08/cross-purposes>

xi Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (ed) *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ANU Press, 2016.
<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/pacific/new-pacific-diplomacy>

xii The Voldemort problem (from the Harry Potter character who can't be named):

While Australia is saying important things about the region, look in vain for the i-word in Prime Minister Scott Morrison's significant Pacific speech ('Australia and the Pacific: a new chapter') or from Foreign Minister Marise Payne (State of the Pacific 2018 conference or Fiji Press Club).

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Frances Adamson seemed to offer i-word gold at the 2019 Australasian Aid Conference: 'No one ever said integration was easy, or complete!'

But it was a false sighting. She was talking about the integration of AusAID into DFAT.

When the i-word does appear, it's confined to the economic side, not security.

DFAT's head of the Office of the Pacific, Ewen McDonald, gave the best example in a speech at the Australian National University, titled 'Realising the Pacific's vision for stability, security and prosperity':

'At a time when uncertainty permeates the global economy, we are also committed to better integrating Australian and Pacific island economies. This will improve regional prosperity. The Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus—or PACER Plus trade and development agreement—will be the first reciprocal regional trade agreement in the Pacific, and is expected to enter into force in late 2019. The agreement will open up new markets and opportunities for Australian and Pacific businesses.'

DFAT's web description of the step-up points towards integration only once, also in talking about PACER Plus. The department says Australia is offering 'a more ambitious and intensified engagement in the Pacific to support a more resilient region'.

xiii Jenny Hayward-Jones, 'Why is Australia's Pacific influence waning', *Australian Foreign Affairs: our sphere of influence, rivalry in the Pacific*, AFA6, July, 2019.
<https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/extract/2019/08/cross-purposes>

xiv Pacific Islands Forum, 'The Pacific Plan for strengthening regional cooperation and integration', *Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*, 2005 and revised 2007.
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/robp-pacific-2013-2015-pacific-plan.pdf>

^{xv} Matthew Dornan, 'Pacific plan reviewed – what next?' *Devpolicy*, February 4, 2014.
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^{xvi} Jenny Hayward-Jones, 'Why is Australia's Pacific influence waning', *Australian Foreign Affairs: our sphere of influence, rivalry in the Pacific*, AFA6, July, 2019.
<https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/extract/2019/08/cross-purposes>

^{xvii} Dame Meg Taylor, 'Remarks by the secretary-general, Dame Meg Taylor, at the launch of the book *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*', Canberra, November 11, 2019.
<https://www.forumsec.org/remarks-by-the-secretary-general-dame-meg-taylor-at-the-launch-of-the-book-framing-the-islands-power-and-diplomatic-agency-in-pacific-regionalism/>

^{xviii} Dame Meg Taylor, 'Griffith Asia Lecture 2019', Brisbane, November 11, 2019.
<https://www.forumsec.org/griffith-asia-lecture-2019-delivered-by-the-secretary-general-of-the-pacific-islands-forum-dame-meg-taylor/>

^{xix} These thoughts on the 'sea of islands' are drawn from [Epeli Hau'ofa](#), a wonderful islander who grew up in Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Fiji. He attacked the European framing of the islands that was about mentality as much as maps:

'Nineteenth-century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the contraction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world into the Pacific Island states and territories that we know today. People were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other. No longer could they travel freely to do what they had done for centuries. They were cut off from their relatives abroad, from their far-flung sources of wealth and cultural enrichment. This is the historical basis of the view that our countries are small, poor, and isolated.'

Epeli embodied the phrase 'scholar and gentleman' and his work lives on. The core expression of today's regionalism, the '[Blue Pacific](#)', is built on Epeli's '[new Oceania](#)' and the social networks he called '[the ocean in us](#)'.

^{xx} Dame Meg Taylor, 'Remarks by the secretary-general, Dame Meg Taylor, at the launch of the book *Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*', Canberra, November 11, 2019.
<https://www.forumsec.org/remarks-by-the-secretary-general-dame-meg-taylor-at-the-launch-of-the-book-framing-the-islands-power-and-diplomatic-agency-in-pacific-regionalism/>

^{xxi} Graeme Dobell, 'Status quo Australia versus revisionist Fiji', *The Strategist*, ASPI, February 25, 2014.
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/status-quo-australia-versus-revisionist-fiji/>

^{xxii} Graeme Dobell, 'China challenges Australia in the South Pacific', *The Strategist*, ASPI, October 2, 2018.
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-challenges-australia-in-the-south-pacific/>

^{xxiii} Graeme Dobell, 'South Pacific security at Shangri-La', *The Strategist*, ASPI, June 5, 2019.
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/south-pacific-security-at-shangri-la/>

^{xxiv} Edward Cavanough, 'When China came calling: inside the Solomon Islands switch', *The Guardian*, December 8, 2019.
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<https://devpolicy.org/how-png-lost-us120-million-and-the-future-of-deep-sea-mining-20200428/>
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<https://www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>
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xli See Mary-Louise O'Callagan, 'Stepping out – and up – in the hot mess of the South Pacific', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, June 5, 2019, on how [religion has linked the Morrison family to the islands](#): 'Veterans over the past couple of decades of many church-related trips to the Pacific (mostly Fiji), the Morrisons, frequently privileged to be house guests of their Pacific Island hosts, are more than familiar with the legendary and very genuine warmth of island hospitality. Such intimate exposure to the ebb and flow of ordinary Pacific life over nearly half a lifetime, also renders Australia's 30th Prime Minister somewhat unique ... Morrison is likely the first prime minister since Federation to bring to the office such personal insight and real affinity for our island neighbours. When Scott Morrison speaks of the Pacific being family he actually means it.'

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xlii A statement warning about '[growing threats to media freedom](#)' from the [Melanesia Media Freedom Forum](#), representing journalists from Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and West Papua, was underlined by [Vanuatu's attempted expulsion](#) of a long-serving editor, later overturned by a court order. Kiribati chucking out a visiting Australian TV crew also says something about media problems. The Vanuatu story illustrates the forces confronting Pacific journalists. In a '[dark day for media freedom](#)', the media director and publisher of Vanuatu's *Daily Post*, Dan McGarry, had to leave the country where he's lived for 16 years. As McGarry writes, 'I believe the government refused my application to renew my work visa to silence me and warn other journalists in the country not to speak out.'

Like much else in the South Pacific, there's a China dimension. McGarry says the prime minister's office warned him about 'negative' coverage in July last year:

'The Daily Post had just published a series of articles relating to how the government had detained six Chinese nationals—four of whom had Vanuatu citizenship—without trial or access to legal counsel. They were stripped of their citizenship and placed on a plane to China. We don't know what happened to them after that ...

'There's no evidence to suggest that China has asked for or even wanted my removal. But it seems clear that political pressures exerted on senior bureaucrats have resulted in this attempt to stifle the media.'

Kiribati detaining and expelling the Channel 9's TV crew certainly added drama to the '[trouble in paradise](#)' story on *60 Minutes*, and played to its report about 'sinister' Chinese activities. Watching the segment, though, it seemed more the usual island play of political personalities and power, with extra pressure stirred in by Kiribati's switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.

Vanuatu and Kiribati join Papua New Guinea and Fiji on the dishonor roll of island governments that have expelled journos over the decades. In heaving hacks, governments always talk tough about asserting sovereignty, but it's a bad look. Why so sensitive? What's to hide? This assertion of power makes a government look weak, not strong.

^{xlvii} Jemima Garrett, 'China, media freedom in the Pacific, and the great Australian silence', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, November 20, 2019.

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