

SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE  
INQUIRY INTO PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE  
ISLAND STATES OF THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC  
SUBMISSION

Submission No: 1

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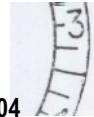
PM

Subject: Centre for South Pacific Studies

Grant McCall

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Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the south-west Pacific (known as Oceania or the South Pacific), with particular reference to:

- (a) the current state of political relations between regional states and Australia and New Zealand;
- (b) economic relations, including trade, tourism and investment;
- (c) development cooperation relationships with the various states of the region, including the future direction of the overall development cooperation program; and
- (d) the implications for Australia of political, economic and security developments in the region.

### **General Remarks**

I do not believe that the Centre for South Pacific Studies needs to submit factual material to this Committee: this Centre has done that several times since its founding in 1987 and resulting documents have shown that the Inquiry itself generates a considerable body of material, making any contributions from CSPA redundant.

The facts of Australia's involvement are widely known and available; it is opinions that may be most useful in interpreting these facts.

**(a) the current state of political relations between regional states and Australia and New Zealand;**

18/04/2002



I have been struck always by the extreme modesty with which Australia pursues its role in Oceania, whether narrowly defined as the Southwest Pacific, or the larger body of water that is the most relevant. I have been on Rapanui, which is a province of Chile, since January 2001. Chile uses its territories in Rapanui and Antarctica to establish its concept of "Mar Presencial", and has done so since 1992. Chile pretends to manage that enormous chunk of water and, let us not forget, resources. Australia on the other hand keeps a very low profile and appears exceptionally modest in its claims for influence and, even, relevance. Traditionally, this has been a kind of arrangement, based on the British division of the Pacific in the 19th century: Australia the southwest and New Zealand the rest! The kind of grand vision of an Australasian union that marked discussions in the late 19th century in Australia and New Zealand has yet to materialise, although the CER approximates such an interest. Most notably absent in Australia's vision has been any real interest in those states of the southwest Pacific and perhaps even a solid disdain for entities further afield. Islanders throughout the region are aware of this and voice this disappointment in regional fora which perhaps is why Australia's participation in such meetings has been rather slight in the last few years. One of the best results of the CER development would be that Australia might take on some of New Zealand's responsibilities as part of the growing union. This is not to say that Australia would take over what New Zealand does, but take on the same role in concert with New Zealand. Australia and its representatives can learn a good deal from the cultural sensitivity of New Zealand behaviour in the region. Most tangibly this would be in the area of greater facility for the relatively small numbers of Pacific Islanders who seek entry into Australia; many of the numbers resident in Australia already have come to us through New Zealand anyhow.

**(b) economic relations, including trade, tourism and**



**investment;**

In spite of the official lack of interest from a succession of Australian governments, these areas develop fine on their own. Australian businesses have been founded on and enriched by their trade with Pacific island countries. Australian tourists will continue to favour in large numbers the southwest Pacific, even the wider Pacific canvas. Investment will continue to grow in accordance with practices that have been developed since the first days of the New South Wales colony, with sharp operators and decent folk each trying their luck in our closest and most understandable neighbours.

**(c) development cooperation relationships with the various states of the region, including the future direction of the overall development cooperation program; and**

Australia used to have a position of importance in the area of development cooperation in the Pacific Islands but other nations with a greater, even grander vision, of the region will take over from us. There is a constant down playing of Australian development cooperation and this likely will continue to the detriment of Australian trade and investment, in the fullness of time to be matched by a consequent decline in influence.

(d) the implications for Australia of political, economic and security developments in the region.

Australia grew in dependence on the United Kingdom, which alliance it switched to the USA after the Second World War. Always important to Australia's development has been our relations with Pacific island territories, Sydney being a major port. This importance has rarely been admitted, just quietly practiced by our business houses. Perhaps beginning with the Hawke government, a turn was taken towards Asia and our hopes for riches and, perhaps even, influence. This is a forlorn hope as we have discovered on



numerous occasions. As many times as we are welcomed in Fiji, we are rebuked in Malaysia. Papua New Guineans are accustomed to our style, Japan still puzzled by it. This is not race, but culture and history. We may not share culture with our Pacific islander co-regionals, but we do share recent history. Owing to our relative small size - obviously not geographic, for Australia - we have more in common with small island states than we do with the large, continental (even insular) states of Asia and SE Asia. We see ourselves as far from the major centres of the world as Pacific Island countries do and our economy suffers from a similarly small local market and lack of sufficient capital for development. Owing to a common background as colonies of Europe, Australia and the states and territories of the Pacific islands have much more in common in terms of institutions of government and religion, business and law and, even, sport and educational systems than we ever will have with our Asian partners. This crosses European colonial barriers. A French Polynesian will feel much more at home in Auckland than an Australian ever will in Tokyo; a New Caledonia on the Gold Coast than a New Zealander in Hanoi. The Pacific Ocean region constitutes easily one third of the earth's surface, 20% of the cultures of the planet, but is sparse in both terrestrial and populational resources. There is much that we could give the Pacific and much that we could receive from them, but as long as we seek, in the title of a book published in Sydney in the 1920s, to try to "sell a pair of shoes to every Chinaman", we will remain small, limited and far below our potential as a nation and partners in the future centre of the planet. I look forward to your report and, with any luck, its positive conclusions for our proper future.

Sincerely yours,

Grant McCall  
Director  
Centre for South Pacific Studies

18/04/2002





