

**Submission  
to the  
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee  
Parliament of Australia**

**“Inquiry into Australia’s relationship with Papua New Guinea and other  
Pacific Island Countries”**

**Hank Nelson and David Hegarty  
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies  
Australian National University**

**Introduction**

Included in the Cabinet approval for the creation of the Australian National University in 1945 was a research school of Pacific affairs. From its beginnings in the late 1940s, the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies has been concerned with both long-term research and solutions to immediate regional crises. A recent addition to the School is the *State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Project*, established in 1996 by the ANU with support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and from AusAID, with the objectives of encouraging scholarship on contemporary Melanesia and the Pacific and to provide a linkage where possible between the research and policy communities. The submissions which accompany this overview are not an official School submission, but are observations by scholars who themselves chose to make comments. Other members of the School may make separate submissions.

We encourage the Senate Committee of Inquiry to consult those academics with particular specialisations in Melanesia and the Pacific. All those who have made submissions are willing to appear before the Committee and we can nominate others who are also prepared to appear.

**Issues of ... governance**

1. The Committee is holding its enquiry at a critical time in the history of the islands to the near north and in Australian relations to the region. It is now 27 years since the Independence of Papua New Guinea. One generation has grown up in the post colonial state, the generation that was trained under Australian rule and entered the work force in the late 1960s and early 1970s is now leaving office, and, more significantly, the institutions left by the Australians have lost momentum, efficiency, and in some cases relevance. Few institutions, more appropriate to Melanesian societies and more able to express and fulfill Melanesian expectations, have arisen. (*The themes of “transfer of institutions” and*

*of their “uneasy fit” with local political cultures are explored in the submissions by Drs Peter Larmour and Sinclair Dinnen).*

2. There has been a tendency for outsiders to advise on policy when the agencies expected to implement policy have slight capacity to do so. There is little point in having an excellent policy on education if the department of education does not even have the capacity to ensure that all teachers are paid and are supplied with pencils and paper. A reformed health policy is of little use to the health worker who has no tablets and no bandages and lives in an area where travel is restricted by banditry and feuding. There is absolutely no doubt that public sector reform is vital to the future development of PNG and the Pacific Island countries because it underpins their more effective governance. *(Issues of public sector reform and ways by which such reform might be implemented are examined in the submission by Professor Mark Turner and David Kavanamur).*

### **Issues of ... representativeness**

3. At the time of writing the outcome of the election in Papua New Guinea is unclear, but already the conduct of the election has revealed a continuation of a disturbing trend. The number of parties has increased (now 43) and the numbers of candidates has again increased so that 30 commonly contest each seat. Many of the candidates are independents. Fragmentation of the vote is inevitable, and 2000 votes is sufficient to ensure success in many electorates in which at least six or seven candidates poll over 1000 votes. In the electorates where extended family, clan and clan alliances are strong then elections tend to become contest of the strength of the clan and its allies. Policies and party affiliation have little influence and candidates do not campaign outside their home areas.

4. It is difficult to argue that a man winning 10% of the vote, elected because he commands the loyalty of the largest coherent group, holds a mandate. In addition, the deliberate and accidental failures in the electoral rolls, the bribing and intimidation of officials, the stealing and selling of ballot papers, and the violence that has accompanied the polls have further reduced the legitimacy of the winning candidates. Where there are so many candidates, where the winning vote is low, then the illegal transfer or suppression of just a few hundred votes is sufficient to sway the result, and that has happened in many electorates. When elections take place where violence and intimidation are common then voters are likely to turn to leaders able to protect them in those circumstances.

### **Issues of ... legitimacy**

5. The corruption of the voting process is generally different from that in countries where a dominant leader or party is able to manipulate a national poll

to advantage. The electoral inefficiency, corruption and violence in Papua New Guinea is generally seen at the local level and is designed to ensure that one local candidate succeeds over other local candidates. In Papua New Guinea there are so many opportunities for candidates to feel aggrieved that the courts will be called upon to determine more and more seats. Again these cases will be specific to candidates and electorates, and by their numbers further inhibit acceptance of due process.

6. The formation of the “national” government then takes place from “local” candidates with strong obligations to home groups, but not to national parties or to national interests. Many of the members are new, partly because all potential candidates have known for five years that their first task was to defeat the sitting member. The newness of the members ensures that few have accumulated allegiances to policies or leaders. The result is that there are few ways to hold a government together other than by offering inducements – positions, favours to electorates, and outright bribes.

7. The deterioration in the electoral process and the peoples’ declining perception of equity in the process coupled with the formation of governments from individuals uncommitted to parties policies or the national interest now dangerously undermines the legitimacy of the governments in both Papua New Guinea and Solomons.

### **Issues of ... intervention**

8. In the past Australia has – appropriately – said that it respects the national standing of neighbouring island states and that it deals with them on a government-to-government basis. But the legitimacy and efficiency of some governments is likely to reach the stage where those conventions of basic international discourse cannot be sustained. Australia may well face the circumstances where it will have to intervene in more direct ways. Presumably this will be done in concert with regional nations, but it will require high levels of sensitive diplomacy and make high demands on armed and unarmed services required to work it what may well be chaotic circumstances.

9. When considering “interventions” of whatever kind – from military to humanitarian assistance – policy planners will need to be alert to the principles that no one size fits all, that interventions must be designed to meet the specific circumstances and that it is easier to strengthen flagging states than it is to revive them. Lessons can be drawn from the three recent successful interventions in our region – East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands – which illustrate the necessity of:

- understanding the particular local circumstances
- getting the shape and nature of the intervening force right
- appreciating the limitations of intervention, i.e. supporting not “fixing”
- “building” the peace from the moment hostilities cease.

The “post-conflict” phase of crises in our region - and such contingent issues as disarmament, demobilization, demilitarization, reconciliation, rehabilitation, indigenous leadership of the peace process, gender relations, reduction in incentives and opportunities for “spoilers” and “profiteers” and including rebuilding/ re-engineering state institutions - needs particular attention from policy makers. *(The submission by Nicole George highlights an often-neglected consequence of war and conflict – the seriously adverse impact on the health and security of many women).*

### **Priority for Research on the Pacific Region**

10. The Australian Government introduced national research priorities in four areas in the selected sciences at the end of 2001 - nanotechnology, photonics, genome/phenome research and complex and intelligent systems. National research priorities will be extended to other sciences, technology and engineering in 2002/3, and into the social sciences and humanities in 2003/4.

11. It is essential that research into the region be a national research priority. The arguments are obvious. To be good regional citizens we should be informed about our neighbours, the rest of the world expects Australians to know and lead in the region, in the event of natural or man-made disasters Australia will be expected to respond, the capacity for research in institutions within the islands is limited, and Australia must replace its older generation of scholars at a time when there are few undergraduate courses in Pacific Island studies. We must expect that at any given time over the next decade there will be Australian troops, peace keepers and emergency workers operating in the arc of islands to the north and east; that at all times Australians will be engaged in major civil projects in the islands; that the area will absorb much time from government officials in foreign affairs, aid and defence and that there will be almost no media surveillance. (Much of the Australian reporting of the PNG elections has been dependent on one AAP representative.)

12. For Australia to respond sensitively and practically to emergencies, to formulate sound policies over the long term, to have an informed public, it is essential that research into the Pacific islands be a national priority. Research should be complemented by an on-going program of contact and engagement with Pacific island visitors to the ANU and other institutions and agencies. Continuing funding by the Australian government for a Visitors’ Program is

vital to maintaining these linkages. *(The submission by Dr Bronwen Douglas shows ways by which research can creatively inform policy particularly in relation to social relations and those elements of civil society such as womens' organizations and churches which establish cohesiveness and generate a demand for better governance. A related submission by Professor Donald Denoon outlines practical methods by which tertiary educational institutions of PNG more ably might fulfill their mission).*

### **Appropriate Aid**

13. There are two arguments against aid to developing countries, both are arguments proclaimed to be based on a tough empirical appraisal of realities, but both are superficial defences of inactivity.

14. The first argument claims a particular country should not be given aid: it is better to allow it to decline further and when it hits base its citizens will be more motivated to carry out reform, and it is then that aid should be given. There are obvious defects with this approach. There is no necessary base. Conditions can always deteriorate – presumably until the last citizen dies. In any case, it does not follow that when a country reaches an appalling state of social and economic decay that its citizens will rally and initiate reformation. In fact, entrenched corruption, pervasive violence and the loss of efficient leadership are likely to prevent the emergence of a cohort dedicated to reform. Seriously defective states are likely to limp along as seriously defective states. For those who want to argue from a tough examination of realities, then it can be claimed that it is easier to effect improvement in a country with part-functioning institutions than in one without functioning institutions. Aid is more effective and more easily delivered in countries where the social and economic indicators are not at the lowest levels. In any case there is a strong humane argument against withholding aid from the desperate and deserving because we should wait until there are even more desperate and deserving.

15. The second argument makes sweeping statements about the general ineffectiveness of aid, and poses rhetorical questions, asking for examples of appropriate and effective aid. In fact, there have been successful aid plans – from broad multi-national plans (such as the postwar Marshall Plan to Europe) to specific and immediate projects (such as the provision of drought relief to Papua New Guinea). The failure of some aid projects is an argument in favour of building up expertise in aid, of carefully targeting and monitoring aid, but not of abandoning aid.

16. There is another related general argument against aid, and it has validity in some circumstances. This is the claim that aid increases conflict. Aid is diverted so that it supplies combatants – with arms or food or medicines – and so

conflict can go on for longer and be more violent. Also, the aid becomes an additional prize sought by the combatants. In places where groups are engaged in intense, long-term feuding, where resources are scarce, and where there are few institutions outside the control of the feuding groups, then aid might well increase conflict. But this is an argument about ensuring appropriate aid and ensuring that the aid is delivered to the deserving, not an argument against all aid. *(Submissions by Professor Maeve O'Collins, Dr Dinnen and Dr Douglas also address the issue of the need for appropriateness, cultural sensitivity and creativity in responses by donors to crisis situations in the region, including by building conflict prevention strategies into aid programs, dealing with states on the verge of collapse and loosening mind-sets about questions of sovereignty and the shape of the nation-state).*

### **Conflict Analysis**

17. For at least four years the media and government in Papua New Guinea have used the vocabulary of war to describe what has been happening in parts of the Southern Highlands. It may well be that more people have died in the violence in the Southern Highlands than on Bougainville. Foreign commentators have been partisan in other regional conflicts – favouring those who fight against transnational capitalists, those who oppose destroying a pristine environment, and those minorities trying to express independence from a large state – and they have kept a wider public conscious of the problem. But few outsiders have any concern or knowledge about what goes on in the Southern Highlands. As a landlocked province difficult to reach and dangerous to travel in, the Southern Highlands has largely been ignored. As a result schools and health services, etc., have virtually ceased and feuding and banditry have become endemic. The conflicts may well have their bases in traditional fighting, but the scale and style of the warfare has been transformed by cash, beer, trucks and guns. The Southern Highlands is in desperate need of intervention in some form to break the lawlessness and the killing.

18. Papua (Irian Jaya) – an Indonesian Province populated largely by Melanesian peoples- has not been a major focus of scholarly attention by Australians. The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies has recognized this deficiency and has been building its commitment to research in the area. The future for Papua will be difficult and violent, it is simply the extent of such turmoil that is uncertain. There are commonalities as well as differences between Papua and PNG and other Pacific Island countries in the ways in which political and economic conflict take their course. It is important that Australia has a deep understanding of the nature and consequences of such conflict. Developments in the governance of Papua – including the methods of control exercised by the Indonesian government and military commanders, the impact of the Special Autonomy legislation and the reactions of the independence movement - over

the next few years have the potential to impact adversely on the regional security environment. *(We trust the Committee will wish to talk to ANU scholars who have conducted research recently in Papua, including Dr Chris Ballard and Dr Jaap Timmer).*

## **Conclusion**

We have canvassed only a small number of issues pertinent to the Committee's terms of reference, but we would be very pleased to have the opportunity to elaborate on the above and on other aspects of Australia's policy towards PNG and the Pacific at a Committee hearing.

## ***Note on Authors***

***Professor Hank Nelson*** is Professor of History, Pacific & Asian History Division, research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, ACT 0200, Australia. Professor Nelson is also Chairman of the Steering Committee of the *State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Project*.

Tel: 02 6125-4767

E-mail: [hank@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:hank@coombs.anu.edu.au)

***David Hegarty*** is Convenor of the *State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Project* and an Adjunct Fellow of the RSPAS. Mr Hegarty is on secondment from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade from 1999 to 2003. The Convenor's position is jointly funded by DFAT and AusAID.

Address: State, Society & Governance Project, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, 0200.

Tel: 02 6125-4145

E-mail: [dhegarty@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:dhegarty@coombs.anu.edu.au)

Website: <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia>