SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT REGARDING THE "INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND OTHER PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES"

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On academic input to Australian policy on the southwest Pacific

It is quite unrealistic to expect Australian policy-makers, diplomats, and aid officials to have the close familiarity with the myriad, highly diverse indigenous cultures and social systems of Melanesia that a professional anthropologist or historian might regard as ideal. Nonetheless, given Australia's often-deserved reputation in the region for high-handedness and cultural insensitivity, a pragmatic awareness of a few broad historical, cultural, and social principles can make for better understanding of our near neighbours and hence for the formulation and implementation of more informed, more appropriate policies and more effective aid delivery.

Important principles about Melanesia

- The modern states of Melanesia emerged very recently out of poorly-resourced colonial regimes with no indigenous territorial or political precedents, except to some extent in Fiji. The arbitrary borders and frequent internal invisibility of the colonial states bestowed an unfortunate legacy on their independent postcolonial successors which are further burdened by internal fragmentation, underdevelopment, and heavy dependence on external aid and transnational resource extraction.

- Politics and administration in every Melanesian country, including in the churches, rest on the principles of male preeminence and seniority (especially by age but in some cases by inherited rank). This means that senior men are disproportionately represented in positions of power and authority while women and young people are expected to stay respectfully and silently in the background, in public at least. However, mature women often exercise considerable influence behind the scenes, especially locally, and some younger educated people, especially men, obtain senior appointments by virtue of their assumed modern knowledge and expertise.

- Paradoxically, in conjunction with male gerontocracy, Melanesians strongly insist on the principles of equivalence and reciprocity. This countervailing emphasis has important implications for governance: (a) It means that people who take on or aspire to leadership are often resented for "getting above themselves" and are criticized for selfishness, materialism, and "individualism" or even become the objects of sorcery; it can be difficult and dangerous to be a leader in Melanesia; (b) It means that politicians and senior officials are, like traditional "big men", expected to reciprocate their supporters and *wantoks* (kinspeople and others who speak the same indigenous language) by directly redistributing the material fruits of their success.

- Local communities are the basis of civil society in Melanesia (rather than its antithesis in the sense that "tradition" is sometimes seen as opposed and resistant to "modernity"). Communities underpin effective governance in every Melanesian country. This is notably so in the case of women who hardly participate in formal government but whose self-sufficient community groups, mostly church-based, are often critical to local economies. Increasingly, women's groups are praised for effectiveness and probity by outside agencies and even by indigenous men.

- Throughout the region, women and their groups are acknowledged to be critical to domestic and local production and to exercise moral authority in situations of conflict, peacemaking, and reconciliation, as in Bougainville and Solomon Islands.

- Melanesian cultures are profoundly but pragmatically religious. These days Melanesian religion is mostly indigenized Christianity – including a growing number of born-again evangelical and pentecostal groups. Religiosity is fundamental to Melanesian thinking, politics, and daily strategic action and is highly visible locally in the activities of Christian women's fellowship groups.

- Melanesians, like most people, make strategic use of oppositional rhetoric: typically, they vaunt tradition (including Christianity) over modernity and globalization, village over town, sharing over materialism, community over individual, "Melanesia" over "the West" (= "the global").

Practical implications of these principles for Australian policy and aid programs

- Taken together, the principles of seniority and reciprocity mean that Melanesians often see themselves not as *citizens* of a nation but as *followers* of the state which, like a "big man", is expected to reciprocate their loyalty, votes, and taxes by redistributing resources and providing services. Reciprocity in formal politics in Melanesia too often degenerates into pork-barrelling by individual politicians who are condemned as corrupt by everyone but their direct beneficiaries. Corruption is thus not an inherent vice of Melanesians but has been politically institutionalized because the Westminster system tends to operate in these new states through local patron-client relations rather than effective political parties. In such volatile settings, the international reform agenda of "small government" is doubly counterproductive: it not only weakens the already dubious legitimacy of national governments but further reduces seriously deficient services and infrastructure development.

- If the positive qualities of indigenous patterns of governance are to fertilize and energize the institutional structures established by colonial and postcolonial states, then means are needed to extend the local competencies of ordinary people and women to these wider spheres. Most Melanesian women, like men, regard politics as men's business but politically-conscious women are seeking assistance to develop culturally-appropriate strategies to translate the local resourcefulness and moral force of women to wider arenas that are seriously in need of them, including international aid and development programs.

- Missions and churches have long been major providers of health, education, and welfare services throughout the region while "the Church" is now institutionalized in the international "good governance" agenda as a major component of civil society in every Melanesian country and an effective and reliable conduit for foreign aid. Together with women's groups, churches have recently been a force for moderation and conflict resolution in the political crises in Bougainville and Solomon Islands while Christian spirituality has been mobilized in parts of the Papua New Guinea Highlands to limit tribal fighting. However, it is not clear that good will, courage, and moral authority will necessarily prevail over undisciplined mobs of violent young men bearing high-powered weapons. Deficient internal security, inadequate firearms control, and the worsening poverty and wealth differentials that produce disaffected youth are problems with which all Melanesian countries to varying degrees require international assistance.

- It is important to avoid the temptation to reduce the complexity and paradoxes of this most diverse of regions to crude dichotomies or to take literally the rhetorical oppositions Melanesians themselves strategically invoke. Actual villages are not anachronistic museums of tradition but often relatively recent outcomes of colonial or church interventions into earlier indigenous living patterns. Villages are modern, heavily Christian spaces in which 80-90% of Melanesian citizens reside. Rural dwellers in Melanesia are not premodern or primitive but our relatively deprived contemporaries who seek to engage on their own terms with selected aspects of modernity and the global in order to improve the quality of their lives without losing valued existing aspects. Moreover, the boundaries between town and village, urban and rural areas, are highly porous with considerable movement and ongoing linkages between the spheres.

Recommendations

Australia can contribute more effectively to the maintenance and reestablishment of stability in the southwest Pacific region in several ways:

(a) There is a need for responsive, flexible thinking about the inevitability of existing nation-states in unstable contexts where the nation-state itself is under serious challenge from locally more meaningful arrangements. Sub-units such as islands, provinces, regions, or "ethnic" groups are widely regarded as "indigenous" and as more responsive to reciprocal obligations than the arbitrary or absent state. Strategies such as decentralization, federalism, and regionalism may serve to give ordinary people a higher stake and more responsibility in national polities which most Melanesian citizens regard as the fiefdoms of politicians and bureaucrats.

(b) It is crucial to recognize that the "weak states" of the so-called "arc of crisis" to Australia's north are not the inevitable results of inherent cultural or racial attributes or solely the products of deficiencies in postcolonial leadership and state-society relations. Rather, they are in part historical symptoms of a recent colonial past (in which only missions undertook some training for leadership) and of present encompassment by often rapacious global capitalism. The weakness and growing lack of popular legitimacy of Melanesian states can best be addressed by tackling the human conditions in which most such problems are rooted: notably the widespread poverty, deprivation, and lack of educational and employment opportunities which help produce aimless, violent young men, growing class differentials, and burgeoning domestic, sexual, and political violence. These are all areas in which sensitively-directed foreign aid can make a significant difference.

(c) More effort is needed at the micro-level to channel aid to local women's groups. It is true that short-term external funding per se can have a corrosive effect on the core virtues – teamwork, internal solidarity, and self-sufficiency – of such highly egalitarian groups. However, targeted practical assistance to women's groups can yield considerable dividends for relatively small outlays providing it involves thorough consultations with the groups and their communities. Modest programs such as adult literacy classes in lingua franca, provision of sewing machines, and training in sewing and sewing-machine maintenance are much appreciated by women because they enhance their self-esteem, are economically beneficial, and improve the quality of life for women, their families, and their communities.

Attachments

Douglas, Bronwen. 2000. *Weak States and Other Nationalisms: Emerging Melanesian Paradigms?* State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 00/3. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Australian National University. Online <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/2000.htm>.

Douglas, Bronwen, ed. 2000. *Women and Governance from the Grassroots in Melanesia.* State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 00/2. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Australian National University. Online <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/2000.htm>.

Douglas, Bronwen. 2002. Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu. *Contemporary Pacific* 14:1-38.