

## **Paving & Paying our own Way**

*Re-visiting the Past, Understanding the Present & Planning our Future beyond Intervention.*

1. In this paper I briefly describe the public service just before independence in July 1978 and in recent years, some trends that influenced the outcomes we have all experienced since and I discuss these in context so we can better understand how we came to ask our neighbours to intervene in our domestic debacle. My purpose is to propose some initiatives we should be involved in immediately so that, with a little help from our friends, we can navigate our future again with confidence.

2. I believe we can and for my part I am committed to doing so. All in my family are; my nuclear, extended family and the wider community of families in which I interact. And I believe most other families and communities are also thus committed and it is sobering to reflect that this scattered nation of many islands and many languages is connected by old and new blood ties – through marriage – continually being renewed to secure the social fabric. We have a wonderful country the best of which is seen in villages where people deal with real, tangible 'life' issues and not the egoistic circus in this haven of bureaucracy we call the capital. Honiara would be full of more confident and focused people if we all remembered that we are working for the owners of Honiara - the people of Solomon Islands. We can ensure they remember by making sure our City Council is appointed to reflect the Provincial ownership and not ownership by residents. Honiara has always had a transient population. People move through and eventually go home. It can never reflect the best of its owners if we regard its transient population as owners!

3. We have many things to do to ensure Solomon Islands has a viable future and we have much to thank our neighbours and friends for, in particular the nations that make up the RAMSI, the executives and personnel of RAMSI, the European Community and the UN community as a whole.

4. Mere words however cannot make things happen. The catastrophic failure of the public service and political leadership in the past 20 years confirms that. Translating intentions into policy and then into tangible beneficial outputs for the citizenry has never been one of the strengths of our government. In fact it has been its weakest.

5. Today we must rise above the petty, avoid jingoism, screen out the rhetoric and nail down just how we can make our country come alive again and then make sure that words are translated into realities. Only when we can do so will we earn self respect and respect from our friends.

6. My understanding of the essence of our national endeavour at this point in our history is this; 'how we can re-organise and look after our national family of communities well enough to pave and pay our own way as a nation among nations?'

7. In my view this is the ultimate question and I believe we need to keep this focus in mind or we will be caught in all manner of contradictions and debate.

8. There is much to discuss and there are many 'wantoks' fully capable of analysing the many issues and challenges confronting us. I will confine myself to a brief overview of missed chances and opportunities and bungled decisions that I believe resulted in us having a public service that has almost brought about the ruination of our country. This includes describing trends over the years and in the recent past. I do that for background, as my main intention is to propose important tasks that must be carried out urgently to build our nation anew.

9. The perspective I have derives from a long association with the public service here and international public services I have worked in as staff or for as a contractor. It began even before 1973 when I became President of what was then called the Civil Servants Association and it continued when I became Permanent Secretary for the Public Service in the SIAC Government that was toppled in the coup d' etat of June 2000.

10. Before 1973, as a cadet journalist in the then Department of Information and Broadcasting, one of my tasks was to do the rounds of courts and police stations to let people know how law and order was being maintained by police and the courts of law. These were functioning well as witnessed by the number of reports made to police, the number of arrests made, court cases heard and the convictions handed down. I for one did not notice over the years that these reports had become fewer and fewer. I did however begin to take notice when our famous 'coconut wireless' (the informal network at its best represented today by the CSN and at its worst by rumour-mongers) kept reporting more and more police involvement in crime. But that is an aside.

11. In the late 60's I became conscious of an early form of nationalism and discipline in leadership being demonstrated by our first local magistrate, Mr. Silas Sitai, who was from Makira in Eastern District. It was the time of Districts - not yet Provinces - and we all had District identities when we met in Honiara. Mr. Sitai was known by many Eastern District people as a very strict Magistrate who would serve sentences and penalties to people of his own district that were often much higher than what people of other districts received in his judgements. He was respected for that and some of us continued to work with what I describe as the 'Sitai principle' which effectively holds that in public service, managers are required to be tougher on their own wantoks to demonstrate impartiality – or, more correctly – the absence of favouritism, which is today misnamed as 'wantok bisnis' instead of 'corruption' and 'bad management'.

12. In a nation such as ours, it is very important that a person in authority in the public service is seen to be tougher on his own people (ie relatives, language group, island and province) than on others. I am from Western Province. I learned this from a senior person from Makira Province and it has served me well.

13. The public service we inherited was modelled on the British military outpost command system that once served the purposes of a colonial empire. Here it was captured early, as usual by the elite, those groups of families who had early opportunities for further education. Government's 'manpower planning' schemes of the 70's and 80s also contributed by raising specially selected young people through the strata of educational advancement to emerge 'qualified' to fill technocratic jobs. These people became very good at what they were 'trained' for but were not very capable of discussing other important matters of the nation. They were fixated on micro issues when macro trends indicated problems. Eventually they lost control of the public service to politicians, many of whom had little formal education and limited vision.

14. There were several points at which the impact of the decline of the public service became noticeable. In services to the people from departmental reception desks, in the inability to maintain discipline which allowed politicians to ride roughshod over rules and regulations (eg General Orders and Financial Instructions), in taking easy administrative options by continually transferring errant public servants instead of dealing firmly with them, in the tardy work habits and in the fawning of staff for favours and opportunities. Many were rewarded with scholarships and promotions and the public service continued its decline and became thoroughly politicised. The governmental units that suffered the most were the Provincial Governments. To this day they do not have full control over public servants seconded from government's sector ministries. The difficulties of local politicians are immense. First the Area Council system collapsed for lack of funds and political willpower to sustain them. Then provincial government ability to provide local governance was severely curtailed as I explain below.

15. This decline could have been averted had our governance systems been re-organised earlier on. At Independence in 1978 it had been recognised that after a settling in period of about ten years, we should review our system of government, in particular the constitution. In other words we should have re-designed, renewed and updated the instruments by which we looked after ourselves some 15 years ago.

16. A start was made but the job was never completed. A constitutional review was carried out in 1987. This took place under difficult conditions because we had been hit the year before by Cyclone Namu which wiped out our rice industry, large stands of forests and reduced our palm oil production significantly. Under economic pressure, the leaders of the day relaxed the forestry regulations and what had begun as controlled exploitation of forest

resources became a torrent of uncontrolled exports and millions of dollars and logs left the country.

17. This, is of course, history, but for my purposes it is context because it is the behaviour of our managers, our interlocutors between the traditional and the modern in those rapid times of change that must be understood. I believe the best way is to observe how elected leaders over the years have had to try to implement 'development' personally – with minimal involvement of the public service.

18. I believe that public service inertia, the result of a combination of ineptitude and self interest, gave rise to the need for politicians to create first SICOPSA (the acronym is from a Government funding programme designed to put development dollars directly into communities), then the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) followed by Rural CDF (RCDF) both of which gave huge sums to MPs to use directly in their electorates, bypassing sector Ministries and Provincial Governments. Recently (early 2004) Members of Parliament formed a Tripartite Task Force comprising Government, Opposition and Independent members and wrote some \$400m worth of projects into a government supplementary budget aimed directly at their constituencies. Why did politicians have to by-pass the administration system that was meant to deliver 'development' benefits to the citizenry?

19. In my view, elected leaders both national and provincial have over the years articulated and drawn up the development agenda but public servants (and their advisers including donors) have not been able to take development out of the files into the lives of ordinary people.

20. Not receiving the planned benefits described by elected politicians in policy, the electorate responded time and again by not re-electing the majority as witness our more than 50% attrition rate every general and provincial election. Parliamentarians and provincial assembly members have learned that they cannot look forward to being served by the public service. In order to show their electorates that they personally can deliver (even if 'government' cannot) they have had to find ways to by-pass the bureaucracy. Thus the creation of SICOPSA, CDF, RCDF and now the Parliamentary Tripartite Task force. These are mechanisms to by-pass the government bureaucracy and deliver 'development' activities direct into rural communities. One can call them 'slush funds' as some do, but they are really a political survival strategy brought upon us by an inert public service. And all politicians seek to survive.

21. The Parliamentary Tripartite Task Force in June 2004 sought a supplementary appropriation of almost \$400m worth of projects aimed directly at their constituencies. This same sitting Parliament was to vote on continuation of the RAMSI mandate. Our government income is not sufficient to finance this. What kind of trade off is expected?

22. The ramifications of public service breakdown, I contend, are a major part of the underlying reason for the collapse of government systems. Few people trust the public service any more. The politicians certainly do not! That lack of trust and resultant collapse is having effect in the body politic. National MPs, using RCDFs and funds sourced directly for constituency projects, are interfering in the work of Provincial governments who are, in the main, reduced to begin agents of national government instead of governments in their own right.

23. Today there is no clear Westminster Parliamentary system in SI. The Opposition is hand-in-glove with Government as are the two independent groups. They are a front united in the desire for re-election or money to see them on their way if they fail - which is quite reasonable if you understand their circumstances! About half of Parliament would need to look for jobs if they lose in the coming general elections – unless of course they each have a nest-egg to fall back on.

24. Today's Parliament in Solomon Islands operates much like the Governing Council that paved the way for self government and independence from 1969. Since then we have come the full circle in political development. We are re or neo colonised - this time by our own and we need to break out of this. How?

25. PROPOSALS. We need to re-design and re-engineer the public service so that we ourselves can sustain it. This point is not new to anyone in capacity building and management. If our people are to sustain a structure, system or process in the long run, allow them the dignity of designing, re-engineering and proclaiming ownership. This is not a concession. It is common sense and good strategy and it will work. Reform began in 1998 with the help of the Asian Development Bank but was disrupted by ethnic tensions in 1999 and stopped by the coup of 2000.

26. When we heard that RAMSI was going to reform the public service, there was no indication that this was to be done in consultation with our local experts. We do have them and they will still be around when the RAMSI personnel leave. If RAMSI can persuade Government to engage our top public service managers as advisors, designers, engineers and managers of the new public service they will find their planning matrix outcomes column quickly recording positives and confidence will build up in the public service. The good public servants who remain are looking for good leadership – from their own.

27. It is quite surprising for many of us who know Australia well, who have very close relatives who are Australian citizens and who have many Australian friends, to feel that the Australian led intervention has either no knowledge of our pool of people with experience, credibility and integrity, or who believe that we are all 'crooks and ratbags'. That's the common feeling. We do have our share of 'crooks and ratbags'. Unfortunately some have

nosed their ways into the corridors of power using large sums of money surprisingly available and coercion. But we know who they are and that they can be easily neutralised. If RSIP were to arrest them, their people will elect better replacements.

28. It is important to reflect that many of us were beginning to have serious doubts about our future in late 2002 when it appeared no help was in sight. The initiative to involve the UN was stifled because of government's recognition of Taiwan as the Republic of China. Australia appeared – then – to be ready to wait for more than 20 years before acting as it did with East Timor. Where could we go? New Zealand could not be expected to soak up all refugees and, after the Tampa affair, it seemed refugees without money or high qualifications were not welcome in Australia. We were doomed, it seemed at the time, and we were considering our limited options. One of these was to 'go with the flow' but that grated with our conscience. We really had no option but to allow the country to go completely broke before elected leaders woke up with no more money to play around with. We were prepared to hit rock bottom, with all the pains that it would bring especially for our wives and children, and suffer scars that would run in our families for generations as people who were collaborators in the ruination of their country.

29. In our despondency and desperation some of us were rather strident of Australia's apathetic position and I wrote some rather heated articles in the Gizo Civil Society Newsletter on which I collaborated with a number of other concerned people. My first article on the coup was published in the Solomon Star under the pseudonym 'Batu Topa' under the heading '**Parliament of History**' and it was aimed at Parliamentarians and opinion leaders. The opinion leaders listened, some Parliamentarians tried but guns and money won. The Gizo CS Newsletter had the wider readership because we also published it on-line. One article told of an Australian diplomat who entertained militant leaders nightly on duty-free supplies taking in their bluff and subterfuge and converting these into intelligence reports that magnified the threat out of proportion to reality. Many of us were given to understand that a hundred SAS officers with good intelligence could have tidied up Honiara and surrounding areas in one week at minimal expense. The majority of police, being loyal, would have weighed in with them.

30. The intelligence was available but disinformation was also being spread. There was confusion about the number of arms taken from the Police armoury. The officer in charge immediately prior to the coup was a proud Australian citizen who was equally proud of his Solomon Islands birth and parentage. He had the armoury's inventory all the time but no one bothered to ask him about the inventory or how the situation might be dealt with. He is a retired Australian Army Major with several years experience as a Deputy Commissioner of Police here in SI. I believe had he been consulted, the intervention would have cost much less for the Australian tax payer.

31. PARTNERSHIP. The RAMSI intervention, as many will point out, came about as a result of a groundswell of protest, frustration, anger and concern for this nation that was expressed by community leaders from all over this widespread nation who held the country together despite or in spite of the failure of elected leaders to maintain discipline. This level of leadership sees the RAMSI intervention as a partnership is between the people of Solomon Islands and the people of Australia, New Zealand and other Forum Island Countries. It is not a partnership between two bureaucracies or political personalities whether human or statutory. This point cannot be overstated. It is imperative for RAMSI to realise that the political leadership are the temporary custodians of the instruments of power of the state. The owners are still the people and it is their interests that must be met first and foremost.

32. It seems unnecessary to propose that it is the principle of the common good or national interest rather than political expedience that must be upheld. 'Expedience' has been a much-used term since June 2000. It is useful to remind ourselves that it refers to a temporary means to an end and implies what is immediately advantageous without regard for ethics or consistent principles. It also implies some lack of candor or sincerity and has a derogatory meaning. Yet it is a favourite term among senior people in positions of authority who try to explain why certain things being done do not make sense or why certain things that can make sense are not being done!

33. RAMSI has extensive leverage - moral, financial & diplomatic – with which to bring sense to elected leadership in this country. We want RAMSI to feel that it has our approval.. indeed more than that .. our mandate to move quickly to apprehend criminals including those in leadership positions in politics, public service and private business. We want them also to neutralise inept leaders by showing that it respects professional, capable and credible Solomon Islander professionals.

34. It is on the shoulders of this group of people that the future of our country rests. They bring not only their professionalism to the task of rebuilding, but also corporate memory that tells them what works and what does not work given our traditional past, our recent history and how we feel about the future. Restoring law and order and good governance in Solomon Islands is not just catching criminals, neutralising gunmen and reviving old government systems and policies. It is about helping us create new systems and restoring the economy with new and creative policies.

35. There are more and more graduates coming into the workforce each year, into an economy of diminished numbers of jobs. Hundreds of our professionals have gone overseas and thousands of trained trades people are out of work. Government needs to be focused on how to stop the brain drain and engage the products of the education system in gainful employment and worthwhile pursuits. We need to do that fast because the young grow restless very fast and the population growth rate is not abating.

36. Already many are watching as the Pajeros and twin cab hiluxes cruise by with comfortable politicians, public servants, overseas consultants and police officers. The watchers will soon be joined by the new graduates who will, if we do not act quickly also become bystanders in the reconstruction of their country. We cannot allow bad leadership to subject them to this.

37. There are certain policies that can be implemented to make this work eg RAMSI insisting on Government allocating budgetary funds to hire local graduates to counterpart every RAMSI executive, technician, administrator and logistics officer including public relations manager. If RAMSI can continue to countenance the payment of .01% of income collected by Customs to their staff, they can surely approve of new initiatives that add strength and value to their endeavours.

38. Government needs to be awakened to the changed nature of the public service which, in most countries now is minimised, its power dispersed, its scope more clearly defined with each job having specific outputs to produce. This can only be achieved with new vision among those who hold the reins of the public service. RAMSI needs to ensure that government places those reins in the hands of real professionals who can make carefully crafted innovations in line with best practice public service management in other countries.

39. CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM. This does not appear in the RAMSI agenda and it is understandable as this is not something for which RAMSI is mandated. But if national interest is indeed part of the mandate, then RAMSI must engage in some way and I propose that they should at least listen to the rationale and try to see it our way. Because after the intervention, we are going to have to deal with the issue anyway and the longer we leave it the more intractable the problems become.

40. While RAMSI is here, we have a controlled situation where fairness and equity issues can be debated openly and critically. There is some misunderstanding about the Federal system which has led, for example, to a number of women polled by an NGO to express the belief that having 'state government' would cause the country to break up and be separated. They have been fed these lines by naysayers who have no political imagination, by those who grow rich on the status quo and, sadly, by people who just cannot move with the times.

41. There are many countries where federalism works because of the pluralist make-up of the population. Even the UK now has decentralised governance with assemblies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Central government here has been a story of central control over resources (government income, land, tenders, honours, awards etc) and our experience thus far shows it is difficult to control our elected leaders once they are in Parliament. The Westminster system has not worked here because it requires European values, perspectives, precedents, conventions and

protocols not all of which are present in our island cultures. Common sense tells us we cannot use a system that is not working to fix itself. It defies logic. Yet that is what is being attempted.

42. ELECTORAL REFORM. One of the first things that we need to do while RAMSI is here is to reform the electoral system. This is so urgent it ranks, in my view, second only to securing law, order and justice. We cannot have a respectable nation if we cannot get respectable people in power. We cannot reconstruct governance if the mindset that gives us the kind of flawed and opportunistic leadership remains. We cannot change the electoral system without RAMSI weighing in on our behalf – because the majority of present MPs do not want to change the status quo... this is how they got in in the first place.

43. LAND. This is equal second priority with Electoral Reform and should be concurrently dealt with. Until we have a national agreement on how to deal with land issues, we will continue to falter. Fiji organised the basis of theirs many years ago, Vanuatu at around independence. We seem to have coasted along as though nothing was wrong while we had plenty of money from aid and logs. We really need to set up a National Lands Commission to ask the people how we should deal with land, study how it has been dealt with in other countries and then work on the instruments that bring fruition to people's expectations. Already much unrest is noticeable especially where there has been internal migration by minority groups. It is difficult and sensitive, but it must be dealt for our own peace of mind as well as to form the basis of progressive land use to ensure the economy can grow.

### **Conclusion**

44. Many of us believe that in the hasty mobilisation of RAMSI there were some gaps in the analysis of our situation that have lead to problems in execution of the mandate. This is understandable but those gaps must be identified and acted upon as we near the first milestone.

45. Here, in summary, is my contribution to identifying some important gaps in the hope that other will see fit to help persuade RAMSI to take a more pro-active role in helping us secure the immediate future so we can plan for the long term confidently.

- It is well known that many people want to see a system of government that fully devolves power to Provincial or State governments and also minimises central government. To assume that governance structures and systems only need revival and reform and transplanted administrative and accounting systems is to assume that the structures are appropriate for government of a country such as ours. This is, in my view, not the case. There is a simple but profound logic in this. We have for many years been cross subsidising each other and there is no impetus for self reliance, no great motivation to drive economic growth and this has contributed to maintaining the dependency mentality. Also

there is real fear that when, as has happened under present arrangements, the national government authority is 'captured' either as a result of a coup or collusion in Parliament or both, the people will lose control of their government. To plan for beyond intervention is to deal with this issue straight away.

- Electoral reform is urgently needed. It is my considered view that a new electoral system must be introduced and used in the 2005 general elections. Analysis by Dr. John Roughan of SIDT demonstrates that there has never been a general election that has resulted in MPs being elected with more than 50% of the total votes cast. A democracy without majority rule is an oxymoron, a contradiction of terms yet that is what we have. It makes no sense for donors and RAMSI to invest millions and millions of dollars in the reconstruction of government systems, the economy and social institutions without insisting that we reform the system by which we elect leaders to wield authority over those institutions and systems. Leverage needs to be applied to ensure this takes place. It takes no great mind to imagine what will happen if we go into the next general elections with MPs receiving huge CDFs, and possibly also Constituency Project funds as sought by the Tripartite Task Force.
- The reconstruction of the RSIP in its old structure viz a national centrally controlled system needs to be reconsidered. In my view, each Province or State whether under a Federal system or not should have their own Police and Public Safety Services. A small national or federal Police will still be needed for protocol purposes, security for national judicial officers and elected leaders and for specialised crime detection, anti-terrorism etc. With emphasis on community policing, it is logistically rational and better response will be provided when communities maintain their own police. Overseas advisors, experts and some politicians are wary of 'wantok business', but they should read the SIG's Education Strategic Investment and Reform Programme (ESIRP) Preamble (p. 6) for an educated explanation of the 'wantok system' that will reassure them of the worth and value of our social security system. There is also an economic principle involved: each province should pay their own way in this as in other aspects of public service.