

## **Solomon Islands Update: Crisis and Intervention**

Presented by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, RSPAS\* and Pacific Policy Project, APSEG\* on 25 August 2003 at The Australian National University

### *Seizing the Policy Initiatives for Governance in Solomon Islands*

**Ian Scales**

#### **Intervention: a rational policy response ... ?**

The reasons for Australia's intervention in Solomon Islands have been cast as a rational policy response to the crisis in that country. Elsin Wainwright has made that clear in her outline at this Update of the reasons for and the chronology of the policy framing, beginning in September 2002, that eventually emerged in the ASPI report and its adoption by the Government, leading to mobilization of 'Operation Helpem Fren'.

There is an alternative view of the reasons for adoption of the ASPI strategy by the Government. Policy scenarios are being created all the time for all sorts of positions within Canberra. These scenarios too have their backers in the senior levels of the Government executive service. However, none of this guarantees that a policy strategy, no matter how rational and well-deserved, will be taken up by the Government of the day. Politicians often look at policy in terms of a number of wide-ranging factors extending well beyond the framing set out by the drafters and proponents of the policy in question.

Mr Downer, the Foreign Affairs Minister, had been quite adamant in public statements that intervention in the Solomon Islands would be 'folly in the extreme', both in terms of a military presence and direct placement of Australian officials into key line positions in the Honiara Government offices (*The Australian* January 8 2003). By 6 June a turn-around of Government policy was mooted, followed by the announcement on 25 June of the mobilization of Australian Defence and Police forces into Solomon Islands, as a part of a regional response garnering support from other countries in the South Pacific. This was RAMSI, the 'Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands'. The mobilization was then extremely rapid, with the first forces arriving in Solomons on 24 July.

What could have changed the Government's mind? The cited reasons for intervention, that the situation in Solomon Islands posed a risk to Australia's interests because of the possibility of terrorist cells moving into the lawless country, small arms or drug trafficking, money laundering and so on were each unconvincing to anyone with a modicum of experience in Solomon Islands. The big one, an Islamic terrorist threat, was profoundly unlikely in a small, predominantly Christian country where everyone knows

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exactly what their neighbour does, both in the city and in the villages. A bunch of Al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiah suspects slipping in and assembling bombs without sticking out loud as the main topic of neighbourhood gossip? Hmmm. The likelihood of a cell of foreign terrorists being able to escape detection while they implemented plans to attack Australia was virtually zero. The touted figure of \$850 million over ten years to counter this threat seemed simply bizarre. Skeptical old hands familiar with Solomons suggested something else had to be going on.

### **... or a Government political response?**

Much more convincing was that Australia, coming off the back of the Iraq war, the excitement of the world stage, the publicly announced disdain for UN security arrangements and the espousal of 'coalitions of the willing' as the new model of international security arrangements provided the necessary charge for Australian politicians to be open to the idea of new campaigns that would demonstrate their commitment to the War on Terror. The ASPI report and its backers suddenly looked attractive: here was the Solomon Islands lying dead in the water crying out for a circuit breaker to their debilitating domestic situation, and a chance to form a 'coalition of the willing' among the Pacific neighbours. A wonderful demonstration of Australia's new potency it was, but we shouldn't think that it essentially had anything to do with Solomon Islands. Without Iraq, Solomon Islands would still be crying out for assistance and the ASPI report would be gathering dust. Why judge so harshly? Well, history shows that Solomon Islands has so far been but a speck of dust on Australia's foreign policy map.

All this would be neither here nor there in terms of Solomon Islands who has received, for whatever reason, the intervention it so badly needed in terms of its own interests: except that there has to be a question as to Australia's long term commitment and direction in Solomons based on its underlying motives. There is no doubt that Australia is feeling jumpy at the moment, post Bali and in a geographic region becoming visibly affected by new, dangerous forces. To be fair, it is reasonable to think that we have become aware that at the bottom of our own back yard, the bushes are growing up high; things are getting wild and left like this we cannot not see exactly who might be lurking there, whoever they are. Best we do a clean up, cut down the undergrowth and have a clear field of vision right to the back fence. This is perhaps just common sense and certainly can help us allay our fears: a pro-active self-defence. A metaphor of course, where the clean-up is to restore the State and law and order in Solomon Islands. That is fine, and I for one am behind it too. But let us be clear that the response tends into the emotional camp of policy motivation rather than the rational. That in itself affects what will happen next. The way the intervention has come about gives good reason to be skeptical about the stated long-term commitment to Solomon Islands to serve their needs in the manner of 'helping friends'. The real possibility is that once we feel less jumpy, our attention will move elsewhere and Solomons will again become a forgotten speck on the map, at least until the next crisis.

### **Seizing the initiative for better governance in Solomon Islands**

My concern is that we should not approach the Solomons as a big working bee to brush back the undergrowth of disorder and mayhem in the Solomons, only to let it slowly

resume a state of disorder once we finish our job. This turns on the question of how to assist Solomon Islands to maintain order in a way that is sustainable; that Solomon Islanders can move on to operate their own affairs in such a way that the internal contradictions of State and society are resolved to a point that crises such as the 2000 coup are unlikely to occur again. So far, the Australian initiative has been cast as an effort to 'restore the State' in Solomon Islands. This is far from adequate; as it suggests building back the broken-down apparatus of Government into the shape that it had prior to the coup, a return to the status quo. Solomon Islanders and experienced foreigners alike know that the State in its pre-2000 form was a legacy of the Colonial period and was not suited to the social structure of the society it was meant to serve. This has been an old theme stretching back more than 20 years, the topic of successive reviews and policy papers within the Solomon Islands itself. The big question is what to do about it.

### **Local-level governance**

Also trapped within the Colonial mindset bestowed on Solomon Islands and not yet properly transcended is a vision of the society from the point of view of the people within it. The coup of 2000 was instructive in demonstrating clearly a surprising reality. Prior to the coup, in 1997, the local level of government and its associated local judicial apparatus were removed from the legislature. That is, the Area Councils and Local Courts were dissolved by the government of the day, as a cost-cutting measure so it was said. This weakened the presence of government to the villages. After the coup in 2000 that process was completed by a withdrawal of government in almost all its forms from rural areas around the country. Government services ceased or were severely curtailed, and the presence of law and judiciary mostly vanished. The result, except in the case of Guadalcanal and around some of the townships, was not a general breakdown of society into mayhem after removal of State controls, but a quiet, if difficult, maintenance of society at the local level.

This underlined the point that these societies spread through the rural areas, based as they are on a large number of language groups, tribal affiliations, religious affiliations and regional identities, have their own ways of handling their affairs, and what is more, these proved to be remarkably robust. Touring the country during the 2000-2003 inter-regnum period, it became clear to me also that the old truism that local society is governed by 'traditional chiefs' told only a small part of the story. In fact, in every place I visited, there was a thriving culture of committees in every village that undertook governance of local functions: the village cleanliness committees, school committees, water supply committees and so on that are a central feature of every village. These themselves had remarkably diverse capacities, ways of choosing leaders, participation and representation, and decision-making processes.

Every village was different, but the generalization that can be made is that usually three elements could be found within the overall structure of governance within the village. These were the presence of traditional leaders, the structures of the church and elements of State political representation. The governance of the villages are in effect an amalgam of historical influences in any area. A further point was that the diversity in structures often reflected ingenious ways of overcoming particularly local conflicts or

disagreements, and were designed to overcome potentially fractious sub-texts to village life. At the same time, it was clear that village governance is difficult and many people wished for ‘circuit breakers’ in the form of outsiders who could be seen to push issues rather than the perennially suspected scenario of local people pushing agendas of personal aggrandisement.

I would not wish to be too romantic about local level governance because the Pandora’s box of lifelong local tensions hidden deep within the intense world of village sociality, the rivalries and jealousies, make great things hard to achieve. Where problems did arise, it was often due to the underlying difficulty in these patriarchal local societies of participation by women and, increasingly in the post-Colonial period, youth. These were issues that local leaders were intensely aware of, and many times wished were expressed that outsiders needed to assist local leaders in problem-solving these areas. However, it has to be said that when the State withdrew, these local structures were sufficiently strong for people to survive and live, for the most part, safely. In that way, local level governance has an undeniable strength.

Thought provoking as this was, a review of past policies of the State in Solomon Islands with respect to their acknowledgement of these diverse local structures led to almost nil. With the exception of passages of the ill-fated Provincial Government Review of 1999, the conceptualization of the State over the decades before and since Independence has been that they are serving a vast island population governed at the local level by ‘chiefs’, and that post-Colonial attempts to incorporate local level governance is a matter of setting up ‘chiefs councils’ in a consultative capacity to link with the State. As I have noted, the bases of local level governance are in fact more complex than this.

### **The development process – State versus local?**

Notwithstanding the composition of local level governance, it has also become apparent on reflection that the overall theme of Solomon Islands history has been a concern with ‘development’. This was the motivation for setting up the first form of State in Solomon Islands, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, back in 1893 and has continued to be the major discourse of State and local society ever since. The problem has been that ‘development’ has not occurred in a manner or to an extent that satisfies anyone for very long. A most striking feature of history has been the competition between the State and local societies over who is to have control of the development process. The conflict of 1998-2000 and its outcomes can be directly attributed to forms of this competition between the local and the State over who controls the process.

The State, which hardly recognises at a policy or planning level the very forces and structures that exist at the local level, insists that they are serving a poor and unknowing local society: the post-Independence state has remained stuck in a patronizing attitude of ‘protecting’ the rural population in terms of top-down planning of development, to do what the poor rural areas cannot possibly conceive for themselves. This was of course in the very name of the ‘Protectorate’ era. In the villages, people insist that they can ably develop their best opportunities themselves, if only they would be listened to, given the recognition and trust from the State they need to go ahead and are given appropriate

support in terms of wider-world ideas and, further, change agents who can help overcome the stalemates stemming from that bane of village life, the often subterfuge local rivalries.

The blindness of State development policies is all the more striking because the very officials in government come for the most part from rural areas and in their own experience know well the dynamics and powers of their own villages. Indeed many of them serve as informal ‘advisers’ to the village committees in their home village, drawing on their education and knowledge of State processes. They are the very embodiment of the deep contradiction of State and society: on the one hand appearing in Honiara as the rational instruments of state administration, and on the other hand plotting with their home kindred ways to capture State resources for the people back home by hook or by crook. In this latter role they are active in finding ways around the enormous inertia of the State has in recognizing the deep wish of local people to see a ‘demand driven’ model of development come about where they, the local people call the shots, and the State supports their efforts.

This of course would be tantamount to turning upside down the old Colonial legacies of a structure of formal government where important decisions are made at ‘the top’ in Honiara government agencies, before being passed down to Provincial Governments who make less important decisions, down to local Councils (since removed, as noted above, in 1997) who are allowed to make trivial decisions. As we know, these organisational structures of the formal State have become more and more disarticulated as time has moved on. It apparently worked well at the end of the Colonial era, and by 1998 was in an advanced condition of disrepair. Telephones didn’t (and still don’t) work, the capital can’t communicate with the Provinces, the workforce had lost morale, resources weren’t flowing down through the system as was supposed to happen, services weren’t being delivered, and many workers had developed an attitude of simply harvesting what they could from the ruins for themselves and their kin.

### **Donors need to understand the State / society contradictions**

Why would the people who populated the offices of the State be stuck in this position of not transcending the contradictions and putting forward a cogent alternative that recognised the realities they knew to exist? Part of the answer has to lie in the relations of the State to its international counterparts, the bilateral donors. The donors believe in the State as a body that works; again it is in the name: bilateral. Overseas development agendas favour formal-sector solutions to development; but whatever they favour, it boils down in the simplest terms to money, a commodity that the Solomon Islands desperately needs.

A whole charade has built up of government officials second-guessing the donor agendas, fitting policies to the funds they estimate will be available, and then, once these funds arrive (albeit often tied to services), distributing them in the best way they know how: some to themselves (jobs, training, perks) and some to their homefolk (‘projects’). The Honiara offices are propped up by the great deal of effort the aid partners spend on providing technical assistance and other services there. None of this is necessarily related

to the best ways to solve rural needs, i.e. the needs of the great majority of Solomon Islanders. There is a whole interminable logic to the situation. Unless the bilaterals begin to understand the contradiction of State and society in Solomon Islands, not as corruption but as a competition based on frustration over development agendas and their control, and encourage a learning approach to addressing the needs of the local level, nothing can move forward.

### **Are State Governments the solution?**

On their part, Solomon Islanders have projected the entire competition at a policy level in terms of the tension between the National Government and the Provinces. This was the upshot of the conflict of 1998-2000. After the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed, the National and State Governments revisited, as they have time and again, the agendas of the States for control of vital functions they see as necessary to develop resources in each of their respective sub-national patches. Without going into it, not all Provinces want the same outcomes from this process, and there is widespread doubt as to whether State Government can provide the local-level solutions it has been touted to provide. Indeed, these various agendas have not been documented in any searching, helpful manner. One of the problems is that there are no other proposals for restructure of the centralized State on the table. The choices are simply, return to the pre-1998 status quo, or adopt State Government. The area that still needs to be discussed is whether, or perhaps beyond this, how, recognition and support of the existing strengths of local level governance as it really is can be articulated with the centralized State. This articulation with the robust grassroots is not an easy call, but it is one that must be attempted. The attempt will certainly produce positive dividends.

### **Treat Solomon Islands as a ‘Protectorate’ or find new ways forward?**

Australia is in a position of having intervened for reasons that are not in the first instance to do with the Solomon Islands. Yet it is pledging long-term commitment to reforming the centralized State. There is a danger that Australia, unmindful of the contradictions in Solomon Islands that led to the coup and the law and order crisis, will simply encourage a return to the status quo. Unless Australia wants to take this on like a new Protectorate, running the country and providing all the necessary resources to make the Colonial legacy of government machinery work in the way Australians are accustomed to, it will need also to consider new solutions. If not, the State in Solomons will eventually fall apart again.

Far better is to take this opportunity to learn what the State and society in Solomon Islands is all about, and encourage lateral thinking about solutions. For this, we in Australia need to build our own knowledge base, beginning with social mapping of local level governance (its issues, needs and structures), and by instigating a rolling policy dialogue with Solomon Islanders at all levels of society (Honiara, the Provincial centres and the rural areas) that tackles the real and ongoing competition between the State and the society and what can be done to resolve it.

Mr Ian Scales is an Associate, State Society and Governance Project in Melanesia