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GOVERNMENTS, STATES AND LABELS¹

INTRODUCTION

Various Pacific Island states have been labelled 'at-risk', 'weak', 'fragile', 'dysfunctional', 'broken-backed', collapsed, 'failing' and 'failed'.² While some of these terms have been around for over forty years, and attempts have been made to define them, they remain imprecise and have little explanatory value. They have particular disadvantages when applied in the southwest Pacific.

In so far as they have become part of social science jargon, they have generally originated elsewhere and are of doubtful descriptive value when applied to the diversity within all Melanesian states. There is simply no uniform 'weakness' or 'risk' or 'failure' across government departments, levels of government or regions. Even where quantitative measures have been introduced into the definitions, they remain arbitrary. The blanket descriptions offend island governments, especially those struggling to carry out reforms declared essential by outside agencies.

The most significant failure of these labels is that while they attempt to describe a stage reached in a process, they say nothing about what that process is, what causes it and what forces might accelerate it, slow it down or reverse it.

Some terms have, of course, been devised to be decorous or diplomatic: they are as precise and analytical as saying 'things are a bit crook'.

The first of these terms that I became aware of was the 'broken backed state'. It was a term used by Hugh Tinker in 1964, but became well known in Port Moresby in 1967 when the magazine, *New Guinea*, republished Tinker's article. Forty years on, much of what Tinker said still seems prescient (Tinker 1967). Tinker said that the granting of independence to those colonies prepared for it had begun with India and the Philippines and had ended with Malaya and Nigeria. From then, independence had been granted to the unready. Tinker claimed that in the mid 1960s even the prepared countries in Africa were struggling, and for those that followed the prospects were grim. Tinker disagreed with those who thought the alternatives were Communism, military dictatorship or rabble-rousing despotism. The more likely outcome, Tinker thought, was the 'broken backed state'. That, he said, was already the case in the Congo where a wounded state persisted in spite of 'massive intervention' by the United Nations, and he also drew on what had happened in Burma. He pointed out that rebellions had occurred in Burma, governments had changed and the military intervened, but bits of the rebellions persisted and the military and

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other governments were not strong enough to impose their rule across the country. Tinker went on to give some characteristics of the broken backed state in which there was a government in the capital, it was recognised internationally, it had an economic plan (analysed at length by postgraduates), and passed some 'enlightened legislation' (that had no influence any distance from the capital), government services were poor (half the letters posted got delivered), and through much of the countryside there were competing political bosses, bandits who levied tribute, and detachments of the police and the army who behaved like the other contending forces. The broken backed state emerged, Tinker argued, not out of a dramatic collapse of the former state, but gradually, and it could persist. The broken backed state, Tinker said, was a 'poor thing', but within communities, religion, magic, tradition, family and clan continued to be important. People could survive, and that was something.³

I have drawn attention to the broken backed state because I want to emphasise just how long this sort of labelling and its associated debate has been around. It precedes by a decade the granting of independence in Melanesia. I also like Hugh Tinker's comments because of the relevance of four characteristics of the states that he describes; firstly they are not necessarily getting any better or worse; secondly, they can last in their inefficient way for a long time; thirdly, they can vary from areas of warfare (but not always the same areas), to regions of peace and prosperity; and fourthly the basic weaknesses apply across institutions so that a change in government by election or takeover by civilian or army dictator is unlikely to solve anything because the incoming government will bring with it many of the deficiencies of the previous government, and will inherit the same defective institutions. For the same reason, the deployment of police and army units to solve problems in particular areas is unlikely to be successful: the army and police will suffer from the problems of supply, transport, discipline and accountability that afflict other sections of government.

The aim, here, is not to take labels generated elsewhere and apply them in Melanesia, but to start in the region and define the significant characteristics of governments and states. The comments have been grouped under sub-headings in the hope that these will not only help describe what is actually taking place, but also give some indication of the diversity and complexity of the processes at work. The use of new categories is not a repackaging of the old in new wrappers; it

is not intended to give the impression that the current position in Melanesia is cause for greater hope or alarm than previously conveyed; and it may still be appropriate at times to call some states 'weak' or 'failed'; but it is hoped that the categories used are more relevant to the region and give a more accurate impression of a varied and dynamic situation. Most examples are taken from Papua New Guinea, the largest and most populous of the Melanesian states, and the one I know best. The comments are most likely to have relevance to Solomons, Vanuatu and West Papua.

THE OPTIONAL STATE

Within ten years of independence, Tabara village on the mid Gira River in the west of Oro Province had few obvious connections to the outside world. Travel was by river or walking track, there was no store and no cash was used in daily exchanges. There was no school teacher and the small aid post had no supplies. Government officers made no regular visits. While Tabara was enclosed within the geographic area of the nation of Papua New Guinea, the state of Papua New Guinea had withdrawn from Tabara. Nearly all decisions about law and order, communal fencing of gardens against pigs, and other group activities that might involve more than one family were made within the village. If people wished to use the services of the state they had to leave the village. That was an option. But it was an option more likely to be exercised by some rather than others. Middle aged and older women rarely left the village — or went beyond other villages equally outside the state — and families that already had members in paid employment in Popondetta or Port Moresby could travel knowing that they would be looked after at the end of the journey, and be given the cash for a fare home. Such families were more likely to send children to secondary school — they could raise the fees and the children would have somewhere to stay while at school. So because of their age, gender and connections, some people enter the state from time to time, and some of the young people will make a long term commitment to stay within those areas administered by the state; but for all people in Tabara to enter the state and use its services is to exercise choice.

Those people living beyond the reach of the state are not only people in scattered and isolated communities. They include some communities on small islands and on the larger islands such as New Britain, as well as in various parts

of mainland Papua New Guinea. These are not necessarily people where the level of tribal fighting has forced the withdrawal of public servants and has made it difficult for police to enter the area unless they go in force and heavily armed.

The extent to which state services — in effect the state — has withdrawn is apparent in a statement by Transparency International on health services in Papua New Guinea. In February 2006 it said that only about half of the medical aid posts operating thirty years ago were then working, and where it had been government policy to ensure that no one walked more than four hours to an aid post, some people were walking four days to reach medical help (*Post-Courier*, 6 Feb 2006).⁴

THE INCOMPLETE STATE

It follows that there are many areas with just one or two government services — the people live in an incomplete state. Even measured against the limited benefits provided by the Papua New Guinea state, most people live without any convenient communication system (post, telephone or electronic) or connection to a state supplied electricity system or water service; a quarter of the people of primary school age have no school; and over two-thirds of the population do not have access to the first four years of secondary school. They also lack those services that come with a developed economy, such as a bank and easy access to a market for the produce that they fly, ship and truck to markets.

The incomplete state is not generally a result of the withdrawal of government services over the last thirty years. While some services may have declined, some, such as the provision of schools, have expanded. The number of students in school may have doubled in the decade from 1992, from just over half a million to a million (*The Contribution of Australian Aid*, p.34). The colonial and post-colonial states have always offered few services and a minority have benefited from all of the few services.

THE ALTERNATE STATE

Citizens wanting government services and foreign governments and aid agencies needing a way to deliver assistance have looked for alternatives to inefficient or absent government services. Cults, churches, mining companies, palm oil plantations, non-government agencies

and rebels take over some of the functions of the state in a limited area or for a particular service. The Japanese might build a school or hook Kundiawa to broadband internet service. Australian Apexians might build a hospital or a Polish community provide equipment for the Modilon Hospital in Madang or an aid agency take over a function of a government department such as the supply of certain medicines; but more significant are those areas where virtually all government services are controlled by another authority. The case of the Pomio Kivung in East New Britain has become well-known since the release in 2005 of Gary Kildea's and Andrea Simon's film, *Koriam's Law — and the dead who govern*. The anthropologist, Andrew Lattas, has provided detail and perspective on the Pomio movement (Lattas). The Kivung predates Independence by over a decade so it was not a reaction to a failure of the national government, but a response to obvious inequalities in apparent knowledge, wealth and prestige of the villagers in their relationships with government, church and the global economy. The Kivung does not exclude the representatives of the government or the mission; but as the film reveals, they are not treated as the sources of real knowledge or power. Like many other such movements, the Pomio Kivung is, to an outsider, a mixing of the rational and irrational: the members are not simply waiting for the return of the dead and revelation, but are working to improve their material lives. By contrast another well-known area that has run a parallel regime, Me'ekamui on Bougainville, has been a 'no-go zone'. Me'ekamui has its own armed force and it has controlled who has entered its enclave; but its proclaimed purpose seems to have varied, perhaps indicating divisions within its ranks as well as changes over time. Some recent statements have indicated that it had no aim to overthrow the Autonomous Bougainville Government and it claims to be supporting the ABG in 'maintaining peace and harmony in Bougainville' (*Post Courier*, 3 April 2006). Whatever its long-term aims, it is an example of the longevity of the remnants of rebellion in states where the reach of the central government is limited.

Palm oil and logging companies have been building their own infrastructures and providing, or promising to provide, other services, but most of all the mining companies have become de facto governments in the immediate area of the mine and the source of funds for governments beyond the immediate mine site. While the building of infrastructure is a precondition for mining and it is in the self-interest of the company to ensure

good relations with local communities, much of the cost of providing community services is offset against tax credits or holidays. The Porgera Joint Venture has claimed to provide 'roads, classrooms, hospitals and health centres, and miscellaneous facilities such as fishing cooperatives and libraries' (Thomsen). It has also built centres to train local workers and enable villagers to develop businesses to take advantage of the presence of the mine. In Western Province, Ok Tedi Mining (OTM) says that its training institute at Tabubil has been so successful that Australian companies short of skilled workers have been poaching their trainees (*Weekend Australian* 1-2 April 2006). The impact of OTM's health services in the mine area has been spectacular, the infant death rate declining from 160 per 1000 to 17 per 1000 by 1993, and is now much better than the national average. Although the mines may have had a deleterious impact on those who suffer from waste in their streams — and it is devastating on some Fly River communities — those who live in the area where a mine has taken over services are likely to be better off than others in the district. In addition, OTM says it has been paying millions to the Western Province government. It has had almost no visible impact. An OTM director said that nearly all money goes into salaries and the rest just disappears: 'We'll put two million kina into a bank account and it has all gone two days later. There is no explanation about where it goes' (*Weekend Australian*, 1-2 April 2006). Greater amounts from the oil and gas projects have disappeared with the same rapidity in the Southern Highlands. One calculation by Samuel Koyma has some K741 million going to the Southern Highlands province and landowners between 1992 and 2001 and leaving little trace (*Post-Courier*, 25 May 2002). When listed it is obvious that the mining companies are widely distributed and have had, and are having, an impact on many people: Ok Tedi, Porgera, oil and gas ventures in the Southern Highlands and Gulf, Kainantu, Ramu nickel, Tolukuma (Central province), Bougainville Copper, Lihir and smaller projects and prospects.

As providers of education and health services, opportunities to advance in a regional institution and a means to connect with and explain the material and non-material world, the churches have long been cooperating and competing with the secular state. In 1963, before the unification of the education system, there were 38,000 Papua New Guineans in government primary schools and 109,000 in mission schools (Currie Report, pp.307 and 315). At times the Administration thought it was dealing with a collection of

theocracies: for many people mission affiliation was more important in group identification than residence in a district, and mission shipping and mission-promoted ventures into the cash economy were part of the comprehensive approach of the churches.⁵ The extent to which even the smaller missions operated in isolation is apparent in their reminiscences, for example in Marjorie Deasey's account of a working life-time in the Unevangelised Field Mission at Gogodala (Deasey). But the recent history of the churches has been dynamic and complex. Some of the older missions, such as the London Missionary Society and the Methodists (who provided the foundation for the United Church) and the Anglicans were more inclined to hand authority to Papua New Guineans while the various Catholic missions and the Seventh Day Adventists retained many foreign ordained and lay staff. More significant have been an increasing number of churches that have members being involved in various charismatic or pentecostalist movements. Thousands have attended crusades in the main towns, members of parliament have proclaimed themselves born again, and forms of the evangelism have penetrated villages from the New Guinea islands to the Highlands. Betty Scarlet, who had been with the United Church for a decade from 1962, returned after a seven year absence to a 'cool reception' where the foreign missionaries at the Port Moresby Missionary Home were interested only in 'Faith Missions' (Scarlet). Richard Eves has written of the implications of pentecostalist beliefs and the state, including the tendency to see a break down in law and order, deteriorating roads and the spread of AIDS as fulfilment of prophesy, rather than as failures of politicians and public servants (Eves p.535). The churches remain politically important and dominant in civil society, but the coherence of the old theocracies has declined as church representatives have lost influence with the drunk, violent and indifferent; some church administrations have become less efficient; and their theologies have been challenged by the emotional evangelism of the 'born again'.

In April 2006 in Enga all districts except one were declared fighting zones. There, and in other parts of the Highlands where fighting has been intense, local groups or alliances of groups have gained dominance. But while the term 'warlordism' has been used to indicate a breaking down of the state into areas dominated by leaders or communities backed by a local armed force, there is little evidence that the warlords have aimed to establish their own states — they have not systematically censused and taxed and

provided services, although they may have taxed in the sense that they have set up road blocks and taken money and goods from those who passed. Most of this appears to be young men operating in defiance of traditional leaders. Those relieving citizens of cash on the Goroka-Simbu section of the Highlands Highway were said to be charging K40 for vehicles and K2 for individuals to by-pass a landslip. They were drinking from cans of beer as they confronted people, and the Chuave police who were there were 'outnumbered and helpless' (*National*, 28 April 2006).⁶ The fighting has certainly been damaging to the state, forcing the withdrawal of public servants, destroying public buildings, ending basic services such as medicine and education, and of course challenging the state's monopoly of violence. The suggestions to develop new provinces such as Hela in the Southern Highlands and Jiwaka based on Banz in the Western Highlands may be stimulated by the local fighting (Jiwaka perhaps in reaction to it and Hela threatening to achieve statehood in part through violence) but both are aiming to be provinces within Papua New Guinea, not separate from and alternatives to the present state.⁷ 'Warlordism' seems to be an inappropriate term: it indicates a stage beyond the endemic warfare that is currently damaging the state, but is a long way from breaking the state into petty fiefdoms, each with its own administration.

For many people in Papua New Guinea, if they have a new public building then there is a fair chance it has been provided by outside donors — so Popondetta received a refurbished and equipped high school as a result of a program funded by the European Union.⁸ If a community has a new road then it may have funded by a company or a donor. (From 1975 to 2000 Australia paid three times as much on road maintenance as the Papua New Guinea government) (AusAID, *The Contribution of Australian Aid*, p.xii). In Madang the interests of donor and company coincided when the Chinese government granted over K19 million to develop roads because of its national interest in the Ramu nickel project. A health service may be wholly funded and staffed by a church. And in some areas all services from policing to anti-malaria campaigns to the provision of brass band instruments may come from a company, or all services may be provided by, and conform with, the politico-religious beliefs of the dominant group in the area.

THE STATE WITH DIMINISHED TRADITIONAL BASE

Hugh Tinker assumed that at the local level 'tradition' and 'religion' would make life tolerable, and commentators on the Solomons and Papua New Guinea have claimed that a basic need is to bind the existing village systems into the centralised state. That may well be desirable, even essential, but what Tinker and some commentators have underestimated is the extent to which the traditional system would lose authority. In the Kotte Local Level Government Council area, Finschhafen District, the Merikeo Community School with an enrolment of about 200 was forced to close at the end of 2005. An armed gang held up teachers on pay days and in one of the worst incidents they walked into the school, selected a girl and took her outside and several of the gang raped her. The local leaders could do little when faced with the armed gang, the police said they did not have the officers or resources to do anything, and no other provincial or national institution was able to help. The teachers left. (*Post-Courier*, 6-8 January 2005). Those incidents were taking place in an area with over one hundred years of Lutheran mission influence and where the church and its institutions have been strong.

Nabuapaka village on the edge of the Roro speaking people to the west of Port Moresby is in another area that has known missionaries and government officers for over a century. Michael Monsell-Davis, who has been visiting Nabuapaka for over forty years, explains that when he first went there the chiefs of four sub-clans had customary authority in the village; but by 2000 not one of the four had been through the traditional installation ceremony, three had married women from outside the language group, and three did not live in the village, although two of them were normally in a nearby settlement. The sorcerers who had previously backed the sub-chiefs were seen to have reduced powers. The church, and its representative, the pastor, had slight influence over many of the young. None of the new office holders — the magistrate, peace officer and councillor — could command authority. Villagers complained of drunkenness and vandalism. Some young men from the Nabuapaka had been involved in armed robbery in Port Moresby, and they were said to have used home-made guns to rob people on the nearby highway. Sub-clans are in danger of breaking into nuclear families which have effectively withdrawn from the mutual obligations that are

a part of sub-clan membership. When people in Nabuapaka talk of a decline in law and order, they are not referring to national institutions but to their own — those that seemed to serve them well through much of the twentieth century. (Monsell-Davis, pp.121-30).

In the Highlands, cases of declining and or changing traditional authority are more frequent and more widespread. In the last year of Australian administration and while the Somare Government was feeling its way into pre-self-government office, a Committee of Inquiry was set up under the chairmanship of Phillip Paney to report on the increasing violence in the Highlands. The situation was already serious. In 1972 in the Western Highlands (then including Enga) eighteen people had been reported killed in tribal fighting, around 280 had been wounded, and on ten occasions the police had used gas or firearms (Paney, p.38). The Report noted that while the resurgence in tribal fighting was greatest in the Western Highlands and Chimbu there was increased 'lawlessness' in the Southern and Eastern Highlands. They also said clan leaders claimed that unlike in the past the 'young men run riot and the fights get out of control' (Paney, pp.2-3). What was true then has got worse. Central to the tragedy revealed in the Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson film *Black Harvest*, released in 1992, was the inability of Ganiga traditional leaders such as Popina Mai to halt the slide into wider and deadlier warfare. Writing recently, Connolly thought that between 150 and 200 had been killed in the Nebilyer area south of Mt Hagen (Connolly, p.250). The death rates have been higher elsewhere, particularly in the Southern Highlands, and the fighting has been widespread. An Australian missionary reported that in the fighting near Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands between the Ifo and Fomu groups, fifteen people had been killed in three weeks, many assault rifles were being used and some twenty-two *haus lain* (including tens of thousands of people) have been involved (*National*, 7 July 2005).

The broad terms such as 'fragile' or 'weak' are most concerned with the institutions of central government, and so are the strategies of those agencies concerned with strengthening the state. While the agencies may be aware of varying capacities of introduced provincial and local level governments to deliver services, there is less consciousness of the radical changes that have been taking place in traditional systems. Some continue to serve their communities well, but in many villagers when people regret the breakdown in law and order they are talking of the failure

of the system that thirty years ago ensured law and order for most of the people for most of the time. The *kiap* visited most villages once a year or so, and while his known ability to intervene and his backing for appointed village officials was influential, and a Christian mission exercised its authority, villagers settled nearly all disputes and policed their own rules in their own way. In March 2006, long serving leader and president of the Yanges Local Level Government in Enga, Jack Nema, went to negotiate the surrender of a man suspected of being an instigator of a fight, but he himself was killed by the suspect's people (*National*, 12 April 2006). Nema's traditional standing, his office in local government and the backing of provincial and central government did not protect him. Weakness, fragility and failure occur in the traditional systems of village government.

THE STATE WITHOUT CLERKS

It is not, of course, that there are no clerks. In the Papua New Guinea public service of around 70,000, there are many. It is a question of whether they are present, and whether they have any desire or capacity or resources to do their work. An editorial in the *National* made a savage attack on the public service, complaining that it might take a day to find the appropriate office, buildings being without signs or notice board and no one seeming to be able to give directions. If the office is found it will probably not be occupied and when it is, there will be a long wait and the answer will be one of 'Come back tomorrow', 'Sorry, no funds' or they have run out of the appropriate forms. The editorial claims: 'We know of a provincial administration where more than 50 percent of the officers employed — and we use the term loosely — can be guaranteed to be absent on any given weekday' (*National*, 31 September 2004). Perhaps some of this can be dismissed as simply the standard criticism made of bureaucracies in Canberra, Washington, Brussels and Brasilia, but there is much other evidence of the failure of government at the level of those who answer questions from the public; look after files; make, receive and record all small payments; manage recurrent costs of power, building maintenance and cleaning; order stationery, ink for printers and photocopiers; and issue permits for trading, vehicle registration, liquor licences and building.

In the Education Department teachers may go more than seventeen fortnights without pay; or the Department might come to believe that

it could have 6000 teachers on the payroll who have in fact officially retired or gone on leave and never come back to work or died or simply stopped turning up at a school.⁹ That 6000 is about one fifth of the entire teaching service. Teachers who are appointed to a new post find that the air fare does not turn up, and when they enquire the Department shifts them to another and closer school, probably because the money for the fare is no longer available. Then there is the long delay while the new appointment is sorted out. Teachers who have been without pay or an expected promotion come to a Provincial headquarters or Waigani to enquire, but are frustrated by the inability of anyone to find a file recording their services. When they are at their school they suffer from the inability of the Department to send supplies at the start of the school year, and when the supplies do arrive they are likely to be incomplete. Because regular maintenance is not carried out, the school may close because the water tanks have sprung leaks, and the students are left without water for drinking or washing. Similar problems are apparent in other sections of the government. The police certainly suffer from similar minor administrative failures of supply, maintenance and personnel management. The same appears to be true of the Defence Force.

It may be that one of the major shortcomings of the Australian administration was its failure to train people to work in the middle levels of the public service. In the mid-1960s, many basic transactions were carried out by white officers. At the airport, the entry permit and the customs declaration were checked by an Australian; for someone registering a car then it was likely to be an Australian woman who provided the forms, took the money and issued the certificate; and in Konedobu (Waigani's predecessor) many offices were run by white women and much routine administration was carried out by Australians. To enter the public service of the Territory then required an Australian leaving certificate or having qualified to enter an Australian university. In 1964 there were over 4000 expatriate officers in the First, Second and Third Divisions of the public service and 190 Papua New Guineans. There were another 1200 Papua New Guineans in the Auxiliary Division, set up for those who did not have the qualifications to get into the three divisions of the public service (*Annual Report 1963-64*, p.34). Even after the decisions to recruit Australians on contract only and give preference to Papua New Guineans, by 1972 there were 6,500 overseas officers employed under the Papua New Guinea public service ordinance. The

number of Australians had actually increased and while they held every position except one in the First Division, they also dominated in the Second Division in positions which were then called Clerk Classes six to eleven (*Annual Report 1972-73*, p.39). That was just over one year before full internal self-government. It was not only that executive government and senior members of the public service came late and rapidly to office from 1972, but so did much of the middle rank of the public service. The result was little institutional memory and few people competent and confident in routine practices.

The problems that arise from the absence of competent clerks are greater than the frustrations suffered by individuals. The anger demonstrated by the Daru police who in several incidents seized government vehicles, intimidated public servants and effectively shut down the provincial administration probably had several causes, but the one the police spoke about was the delays in having the police barracks repaired. Electrical faults have resulted in fires and sanitation depends on the 'black bucket' system which in the wet season becomes unworkable and families are forced to use their backyards (*Post-Courier*, 24-26 Feb and 4 April 2006). Clearly no regular maintenance had been carried out, and over the months that the police protested about the illness and inconvenience that resulted from their primitive living conditions there did not seem to be anyone able to carry out the necessary tasks, even after the district administrator had given general authority.

In another recent case the actions of the chairman of the Public Service Commission has been referred to the Ombudsman and the police for further investigation. The allegations include numerous over payments and unlawful payments in salary and entitlements. In its initial investigation, the Public Accounts Committee said the overpayments could take place because of the 'poor accounting and record keeping of the staff' (*National*, 12 April 06).

The lack of good clerks means that the routine work of a department is not done; the frustration leads to a further decline in morale; and it leaves the way open to corruption. A further consequence is that at times of elections or political crisis much of the public service ceases work. The ministerial staff and the most senior members of the public service are concerned with the political drama — their careers depend on it — and without direction the clerks are even less likely to keep government functioning. In these circumstances all the more credit is due to those middle ranking public servants who do their work

conscientiously and those teachers (and others) who continue to meet community expectations — even when they do not get paid for months, requests are unanswered and their offices and accommodation are neglected.

THE STATE AND THE FALLIBLE BALLOT

The promotion of democracy — and here that will mean a government determined by each adult having a free and secret vote — is laudable. But it does not follow that a democratically elected government will be representative, efficient and have as its primary concern the welfare of the nation. And it is self-evident that a nation which suffers ‘endemic corruption’ and where the public service is ‘politicised’ and lacks capacity to ‘design and execute programs’ will have problems conducting an election efficiently and fairly. All of those terms describing the Papua New Guinea public service were used by the Asia Development Bank in its March 2006 assessment of Papua New Guinea.

For an election to be free and fair there has to be an up-to-date and accurate electoral roll. It is the controlling basis. After the 1997 elections in Papua New Guinea, the Commonwealth Observer Group noted the inadequacy of the system of voter registration and the inaccuracy of voter registration, and in 2002, its successor, the Commonwealth Expert Group said that the ‘worst aspect [of the election] was to do with the inaccuracy of the common roll’. The Expert Group complained that:

There were numerous references to names of under-aged registrants, ghost and phantom entries and multiple replications on the roll.... We were given reports that many people registered and voted multiple times in many locations (*Report of the Commonwealth Expert Group*).

Because the numbers on the rolls were greatly inflated, the Electoral Commission printed far too many ballot papers. This problem was magnified because the Commission thought it needed to be sure it had sufficient, so it added another 15% to the already inflated figure. That meant a system without the safeguard of an accurate roll was awash with spare ballot papers. In some areas the discrepancy between voters and votes was absurd. As Philip Gibbs has pointed out there were 295,000 people in Enga according to the 2000 census and so we can assume that just over 160,000 were of voting age. In fact there

were over 400,000 on the common roll and over 317,000 votes were counted. That is, in spite of the fact that about 20% of registered voters did not vote, the number of votes still doubled the number of voters if the census is assumed to be accurate (Gibbs, p.5). After the failure of the 2002 elections in the Southern Highlands, special care was taken with the second election in 2003, but still, as Nicole Haley has explained, in the Koroba-Lake Kopyago Open Electorate there were sections of the electorate in which there were nearly three times more votes than voters (Haley, p.24). The worst case across a Province was that of Chimbu where nearly three votes were cast for each eligible voter.

While an accurate voter roll is basic, other and equally serious problems were listed by the AusAID review team: voters were denied privacy and coerced; ballot papers were stolen ‘often at gunpoint’, electoral officers and police were bribed or intimidated to accept ballot papers filled in unseen by officials, and ballot boxes of votes were stolen (AusAID, *Review of Australia’s electoral assistance program to PNG*, p.15). Again, there needs to be the reminder that most violence, fraud and failures of the roll occurred in the Highlands and that in many electorates elsewhere there may have been inefficiencies, but they were insufficient to change the election result. The Electoral Commission was in many ways more efficient than other sections of government, but inevitably it shares many of the same characteristics, and it has to operate in circumstances beyond its control. Clearly it is not the duty of Electoral Commission staff to remove guns from citizens, but its chances of conducting a fair election are slight where there are candidates supported by groups who outnumber and outgun the police.

Even if the Electoral Commission could run the election with competence and scrupulous public morality, the elected candidates do not represent majorities of citizens and are not committed to the implementation of national policies considered and approved by voters. The deficiencies are well known. In Papua New Guinea there are now no indigenous women members in the Parliament, and in the April 2006 elections in Solomons not one of the 24 women candidates could win a seat. Democracy has certainly failed the half of the population who are female. In Papua New Guinea in 2002 an average of 26 candidates stood for each electorate, only one candidate got over 50% of the vote, and 20 gained less than 10%. Most candidates received less than 20% of the vote. Two-thirds of sitting candidates were defeated.

Over 40 parties contested the election and initially over 20 parties were represented in the House, although fourteen of these had only one or two members. All of these characteristics — growing numbers of candidates, more parties, lower winning percentages of votes and sitting members being defeated — have generally been increasing with each election. The legislative attempts to reverse these trends have had slight impact, and given that it will take a significant change to even halt the trends, the 2007 elections are likely to have many of the characteristics of the six elections that have taken place since Independence. And one trend is likely to be stimulated by the attempts to control voter, candidate and party behaviour by legislation: there will be an increased number of post-election disputes taken to the courts. Already the vote is often seen as the preliminary to the court. This pushes the judicial system into the political process and makes it more likely to succumb to political influence and outright corruption.

Post-election, problems arise because a government has to be formed from many small parties and independents. As most of the members are new, the power of those few who have survived several elections and have either a party or a personal following in the House is increased. Given that parties have few members outside the parliament and that their election platform was written in the most general terms, any combination of parties is possible. Independents are also generally free of specific policy pledges so they too can coalesce around any individual or party. If a government is not formed on policies and a legislative program, then it is all the more likely that member allegiance will be obtained by promises of benefits to the member and those few who elected him. As members know that their chances of re-election are slight, and that they can do little for themselves or their electors while sitting on the opposition benches, they are keen to join the government and get what they can while they can. If they fail to join the winning side in the bargaining before the first sitting of the House, they are likely to join it soon after. At the first division on the election of the speaker the vote might be close, but within days the opposition will have dropped from over 40% of members to less than 20%.

Electors are generally not concerned about party membership or policy because they vote along clan or other locally important group lines. They are not worried about the health or education or transport policy: what they want is to be able to get more of their children into a school, they want access to an equipped and

staffed medical facility, and they want a road built and maintained. Other aspirations are equally basic: they want law and order and more chances to make cash. If they can't get peace and an end to corruption — and they may never have known a system without violence and unjust preferment — then they will settle for a system that advantages themselves and disadvantages their enemies. In these circumstances they may well vote for, and continue to return, a tough and aggressive local leader who may well have been condemned in a distant town for violating the leadership or criminal code. In the eyes of the electors, he is more likely to succeed in the rough and tumble of the election process, and he is more likely to 'talk strong' to the government and bring home approval for a Local Level Government building, money for school fees, and a Toyota Landcruiser. The tough and corrupt survivors in the Parliament will have influence among members — either independents or within parties or sections of parties. They will be among the contenders for the prime ministership and key ministries, and all who aspire to lead must deal with some of them. The result is that governments are from the start corrupted: they have had to attract and hold members with promises of government projects and positions, some of which may put cash in the hands of members, and they have had to deal with and include in the ministry members with a past record of corruption.¹⁰

Much more could be said about how the parliaments and public services operate. But just getting the members elected and a government in place reveals the problems involved in operating a democratic system in Papua New Guinea and more broadly in Melanesia. It appears that it is as easy to argue that law and order, an efficient public service and an electorate that is conscious of a national interest (in addition to particular group and regional interests) are essential preconditions for democracy as it is to claim that democracy is a precondition for a corruption-free, coherent nation with an efficient government pursuing policies in the national interest. It is certainly unrealistic to expect an electoral commission to have the funds, trained personnel, efficiency and nation-wide reach that is well beyond the resources and capacity of all other sections of government.

THE STATE AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF ETHNICITY

Pacific 2020: Challenges and Opportunities for Growth, an 'initiative of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Alexander Downer', was developed by AusAID and called for contributions from the most knowledgeable scholars in the Pacific (AusAID, *Pacific 2020*, p.xi). It poses the 'fundamental question': 'why doesn't democracy serve the majority better?' (AusAID, *Pacific 2020*, p.95). The authors say that there are two answers: 'clientelism' and 'fragmentation'. They go on to make clear that they are writing of 'ethnic fragmentation', and they see their two answers coming together as an 'ethnic group leader becomes the patron'.¹¹ Other commentators have found much 'ethnic' violence in Melanesia.

If 'ethnic' is given its normal meaning of a group identifiable because of race or culture, particularly language, then the term has been misused and it leads to a misleading analysis. In his summary study of warfare among the Mae Enga, *Blood is the Argument*, Mervyn Meggitt had evidence of some '84 known eruptions of violence' between 1900 and 1950. These, he argued, should be called wars and not feuds, and they involved clans and sub-clans of the Mae Enga. The fighting could result in many deaths and with the defeated losing all or part of their lands (Meggitt, pp.13-14). Warfare then was, and now is, often between people of the same language and culture. Men of an Engan clan married women from another clan: a woman's husband was (and is) often at war with her brothers. That pattern recurs in other parts of the Highlands.

Christopher Hallpike in his study of the Tauade, one of the Goilala language groups northwest of Port Moresby, concludes: 'It does not follow ... that any of these groups conceives of itself as a political or cultural unit, or that difference of language or custom on the border between two groups appears to produce any more hostility than is normal for this area' (Hallpike, p.44). Other basic ethnographic studies make the point that the Orokaiva fought Orokaiva, and on Bougainville Siwai fought Siwai. Those on the margins negotiated alliances and attacks on their neighbours in much the same way as they did with people with whom they shared a culture. There were, as is usually the case in Melanesia, exceptions, so that some strong and expanding communities, although they might have fought among themselves, treated particular neighbours as lesser peoples who were always

under threat of dispossession and death.

Trying to illustrate the many divisions within Melanesia, commentators often point to the fact that there are over 800 languages in Papua New Guinea. Languages are indeed an indicator of diversity; but that does not justify the slide from language groups to ethnic fragmentation and explanations of the political process. What confounds democracy in most electorates is not ethnicity, but smaller groups, often called clans and formed by people who have or assume a common ancestry. The 2878 candidates who stood for election in Papua New Guinea did not have much relationship with the 800 or so language groups, especially when the many small language groups are eliminated. (In the 100 or so different languages of the Sepik-Ramu group about half of them have fewer than 500 speakers.) In contemporary politics, there is often continuity between voting blocks and the groups that once came together in alliances of defence and aggression. In Enga province — where there is a dominance of the one language — in the 2002 elections there were 137 candidates contesting the five open seats. As Phillip Gibbs has pointed out, the problem for candidates was to maintain the base support of their home clan. That was not easy as candidates from the same clan, even subclan, sometimes stood against each other; and — as in warfare — wives (if given the chance to vote freely) may well have favoured someone from the clan they had left (Gibbs, pp.5-6). And while clans were important, other factors, such as personality, the capacity of the candidate to bring material benefits and religious affiliation, may also have been influential.

Ethnicity is also important. As Nicole Haley points out, in the 1997, 2002 and 2003 elections in Koroba-Kopiago in the Southern Highlands ethnicity was a 'key electoral issue' (Haley p.16). The electorate is dominated by the Huli (57%) and the Duna (37%), and includes smaller numbers of Bogaia and Hewa. In the failed 2002 election 13 Huli and 6 Duna candidates stood: there were clear divisions within the two main ethnic groups. In the re-run of the election in 2003 the Duna reduced their candidates to two in a conscious attempt to offset their numerical disadvantage. That is, ethnicity was a force for coherence not fragmentation. The majority Huli by dividing their vote among 10 candidates squandered their advantage. When the votes were counted a Duna candidate, Petrus Thomas, had won, but he had represented Papua New Guinea at Rugby League and had picked up votes among the Huli. Underlying ethnicity were smaller traditional groups and overlying it

were allegiances that came out of success in the modern world of education, business, church and sport. The optional preferential system now being re-introduced is likely to have as much impact on the clans and the new alliances as it is on ethnicity.

On Bougainville it is possible to see ethnic factors (the blackness of the skin of the Bougainvilleans being important in their identity) and elsewhere other large groups may have an ethnic basis when they leave home. Goilalas, Chimbus, Mekeos, Keremas and Sepiks have a sense of common identity in Port Moresby, something they may not feel back in the village — or the district headquarters. While the Mekeos and Goilalas each share a cultural heritage and can reasonably be called ethnic groups, Sepiks come from many different language groups and environments — from river to grasslands, to mountains and the coast. The notion of being a Sepik was created in colonial times and like being a Papuan is a result of lines on maps, centres of administration and imposed labels of identity.

To use the term ethnicity or to talk of 'ethnic fragmentation' is to misread the basic fissures and group consciousness of most Melanesians. Generally, the main cultural groups — the ethnic groups — have slight sense of political coherence, leaders do not consistently command loyalty from all the group, and even language groups of less than 5000 are likely to stand more than one candidate in an open electorate (McLeod, p.28).

THE STATE AS TARGET OF THE PREDATORY CITIZENS

For many communities the only accessible source of quick wealth, perhaps any wealth, is the state.¹² If they are to participate in the growth and change that they see elsewhere, if they are to send their children to school, get their sick to hospital or buy a four-wheel drive, they must rely on 'government', and if their elected representatives and public servants are unlikely to provide, they may turn to a known alternative. At any given time central and provincial governments are likely to be facing claims for 'compensation'. In August 2005 the hydroelectric plants supplying Port Moresby were shut down, forcing the capital to rely on its thermal generators. Port Moresby's water supply was also reduced as Edu Ranu, the water supply agency, draws supply from the same dam. An aggressive group of Koiari landowners had gathered at the Rouna hydroelectricity station and forced its workers to shut it down. They demanded K37.5 million for the use of

their lands for the dams and stations, the payment back-dated to 1953 (*National*, 23 August 2005). A few weeks later at Yarapos near Wewak, the villagers demanded compensation of K500,000 for the damage done to their environment by the AusAID funded work on the local secondary school (*Post-Courier*, 28 October 2005). In other recent claims the Bunga Land Group took court action for K34 million for lands on which the Bulolo township is built; former members of the Fly River provincial government were granted and then lost K20.5 million in compensation for loss of salaries and other entitlements; and in Lae the Ahi have made claims and supported them by threatening to shut down power and gas (*National*, 3 March 2006) and the Labu villagers have demanded half of the land from the old Lae airstrip, joint venture partnership in major developments in the city, the right to provide security at the Lae market, a share of the revenue from the Lae wharf, and other compensation for the loss of land, shore and sea (*National*, 13 April 2006).¹³

Some claims have long histories, going back to the earliest alienation of coastal lands late in the nineteenth century. In the days of Australian rule, sub-district offices might retain notes to warn new *kiaps* that certain groups would resurrect particular claims. The government might have thought such issues were long settled, but the villagers, or perhaps a section of a village, did not think so, and took every chance to restate their case. Some claims were and are completely bogus, some have a slight basis in a real grievance but have suffered a hundred or a thousand fold inflation, and others may be justified. In the destructive cases in the Solomon Islands any money lodged in the treasury was immediately taken out by those who got there early, made aggressive demands for 'compensation' and were backed by armed supporters. In some instances the groups making the demands may be expressing a more general dissatisfaction. This could be the case with the Koiari.

The Mountain Koiari living on the Sogeri Plateau through the Kokoda Trail area to the edge of Oro Province number about 4000, and the distant people in the north may have slight association with those in the south. Those Koiari living closest to the Rouna hydroelectricity stations may feel themselves under pressure from the Goilala and other groups who have been moving to lands where they can grow products to sell in the Port Moresby markets and get access to other goods and services in and around the capital. Also, Southern Highlanders who were introduced to the Sogeri area as workers on the

rubber plantations under the Highland Labour Scheme have stayed, and other people have developed businesses along the road leading to Port Moresby. The Koiari, few in number, may feel themselves under-pressure from, and being surpassed by, outsiders: their claim asserts ownership and demonstrates power, and provides a means for aspiring leaders to show that they can advance the welfare and prestige of the group. The very theatre of confrontation, the shutting down of the stations and reports in the media achieve some of these aims, and even a partial victory in the courts would further justify the actions of the Koiari Landowners Group. In fact, the Koiari protests did result in some gains for them. In the upgrade of pipes announced in June, the Koiari were granted preference in skilled and unskilled employment and they were allowed to retain equipment and machinery used in the project (*National*, 3 June 2006).

The case in Kagua in the Southern Highlands is grand in scale and complexity. Edward Etepa and 551 other members of the Kome group assert that during the 2002 national elections a dispute broke out when an election official marked a ballot paper against the wishes of a voter. Violence spread, dragging in the Kome who became the victims of stronger communities: the Kome were dispersed, finding refuge among distant peoples and losing land, gardens homes, animals, sacred sites and burial grounds. They made a precise calculation of their losses, added exemplary damages, interest and costs and submitted a claim for K68,950,933. The reputable legal firm of Warner Shand presented their case in the Mt Hagen court. The defendants named are not the tribesmen who attacked the Kome, but the state, the police and the electoral commission officers who were said to have failed to prevent the election being taken over by the armed supporters of particular candidates and failed to suppress the subsequent violence (*National* 21 October 2005).

The claims against the government have to be seen against the many other demands for compensation made against companies (most notably the K10 billion claim pressed by Francis Ona and the Panguna Landowners' Association against CRA in 1987) and against groups and individuals. On Bougainville the demands are now for compensation to be made a precondition of the return of miners. This seems to include compensation for those who started the war. In the Southern Highlands the advocates of a Hela province have laid down a different condition: 'No Hela Province — No PNG gas project' (*National*, 11 April 2006). Obviously, demands

for compensation are common where violence has been frequent. In October 2005 the Tendepo people of the Upper Tambul in the Western Highlands paid K31,000 in cash, 142 pigs, five cows, two horses, three cuscus and one cassowary to the Yano. In the fighting, high-powered weapons had been used, eighteen people killed, more than 2000 driven from their homelands and much damage done to property. But the compensation payment made did not cover these main losses which were suffered by the Tendepo who were fighting among themselves but to the Yano who had almost accidentally been drawn into the fight. The ceremony and payments in the Upper Tambul were significant in bringing a measure of peace and making public the extent of the violence, but the money and goods that then changed hands did little for most clans who had lost heavily in lives and property.

Some compensation payments between groups may calm the angry and bring peace, and there may be no hope of ending a feud without a compensation payment; but many people recognise that compensation payments, increasing in size and frequency, are destructive; that compensation is pursued more successfully by the politically powerful and aggressive; and that the lure of compensation or the sudden influx of a compensation payment into a community may be a cause of violence.

Demands for compensation are certainly damaging for states wrestling with a variety of law and order problems, few resources to carry out the most basic tasks, and public servants vulnerable to corruption and with limited power and confidence when faced with the politically strong. The claims for compensation impede the capacity of the state to provide the essential infrastructure of roads, schools, airstrips, electricity pylons or even mountain top stations for electronic communications. They break the contract between people who pay taxes and accept other imposts and restraints in return for services. The 'government' is seen as possessing wealth and advantage, and they can be captured by election and by other strategies. One of the simplest strategies, and the one open to distant and small groups, is to press a claim with a plausible legal basis. Among the many competitive families and clans who measure their rise and fall in the world relative to close neighbours, a compensation payment for land lost, trees cut down or a garden spoiled by the land fill from a road cutting has greater immediate value than the promised advantage of the government service that might be of more value to competitors. And it is better to seek compensation from the government than

traditional enemies: the government has more money, the groups can unite against it, and it is less likely to retaliate.

Where the compensation payments are made to stronger individuals and groups close to centres of government, then the amounts are greater and the results more destructive. They set patterns of citizens locating an asset of the state and attempting to transfer it to their own hands; they encourage politicians and public servants to combine to defraud the state; and because the amounts are large they allow corrupting payments to collaborators. Sometimes the schemes are blatant and close to straight out robbery or extortion, but some are inventive and quickly repeated by others. The result is a state with diminished resources, a public service corrupted, some rich citizens who invest elsewhere, and a broader public with a cynical view of the state and its capacity to act justly, efficiently and to the advantage of the public. There may even be an increase in competition to strip the state of its resources.

The state described here is different from the kleptocracies and predatory states that have arisen in Africa. Measured in terms of brute power and ruthlessness, these were and are strong regimes able to prey upon their citizens, or selected groups of citizens. By contrast, some people attempting — and sometimes succeeding — in taking wealth from the Melanesian states are numerically and politically weak.

GOVERNMENTS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PLAUSIBLE ROGUES AND IDEALISTS

Even before central governments were created, New Guinea was a target of the plausible rogues. Charles Bonaventure du Breuil, known in the history of New Guinea as the Marquis de Rays, began his plans for a colony in New Ireland in the late 1870s (Biskup, p.8). He was a visionary, perhaps mentally deluded, completely impractical and a ruthless swindler. He has had many successors, and they come in various concentrations of those characteristics. They arrived throughout the years of Australian rule, and one or two, such as Errol Flynn, who left debts and broken hearts, later exploited their winsome ways to do well in the world (Moore). They have continued to land in Papua New Guinea. They might be Australian businessmen who claim royal titles and travel in private unscheduled aircraft to Bougainville or they might be the representatives

of an African telecommunications company ready to possess a privatised Papua New Guinea system. They may arrive with what appear to be the highest references and an apparent record of achievement. The embattled and reclusive Francis Ona on Bougainville was rarely without foreign advisers and people able to shape his communication with the world. Some advisers briefly become well known, such as Mujo Sefa who in 1997 became famous because he filmed his boss, Prime Minister Bill Skate, talking freely in a tired and emotional state of his *raskol* exploits (Nelson, p.261). Another who gained passing fame or notoriety at about the same time was Pirouz Hamidian-Rad. He had been the World Bank's team leader in Papua New Guinea, but after both the Chan and Skate governments had quarrelled with the Bank, Skate suddenly appointed Hamidian-Rad as the economic adviser to cabinet (Dorney 2000, p.78). With a contract worth K7 million, Hamidian-Rad set about introducing policies which seemed certain to make a chaotic economy even worse. This led to a number of offers from people who said that they were prepared to give bad advice at a lower rate.

Although the groups may overlap, a distinction needs to be made between the plausible rogues and those ruthless businessmen and mobsters who wish to set up brothels or gambling dens or exploit timber and mineral resources for outrageous profit. The unscrupulous businessmen may have a single aim, and while they have every intention of acting illegally they are likely to be practical. Other overlapping groups have come out of single-issue political movements overseas, or churches or other and more marginal organisations. Having established themselves in Melanesia as advisers on one issue, they may move to a wider role. The plausible, visionary rogues offer advice over a range of policies, and they operate at provincial and central government levels. Their time of ascendancy may be brief, but they are followed by others. We might expect the self-deluded, romantic swindler to turn up in Honiara or Wewak or Broome or Darwin. These are places of last resort, and they tolerate the lost and eccentric. But it is more difficult to explain why they obtain influence. Some are certainly very good at establishing close relations with Melanesians — they are better at this than many of those able to provide sound advice. And they appear to offer quick, easy and home-grown solutions. There is the misleading impression that what is being presented is, or will be, a truly Melanesian solution. It is advice that appeals to those being scolded by overseas institutions and

governments for their inefficiency, corruption and failure to meet targets. It is advice that offers a change from the repetition that progress will be slow and dependent on Melanesians taking tough decisions and inflicting pain before securing modest the long-term gain.

THE STATE AND THE MYTH OF NEUTRAL INTERVENTION

From their first arrival, foreigners had a profound impact on the old balances in Melanesian communities. Directions of trade and the commodities in trade changed. People who had access to stone quarries, had developed skills as stone workers and exchanged their products widely found that demand disappeared. The potters, salt-makers and canoe-makers also lost much of their trade; the sorcerers were more able to retain value in their specialist knowledge and skills. Economic advantage went to those who could trade the new commodities (steel tools, fish hooks, enamel pots and matches) to people without easy access to foreigners and their goods; to those who could enter the new institutions as pastors, police and labour overseers (*bosbois*); and those who could join the cash economy because they had a market for their goods or they could sign on as labourers on plantations, mining fields and in the towns. For some who lost land, the economic advantage of proximity to a source of new wealth outweighed the economic loss, but others simply lost. Disease, more than violence, changed population balances. In small-scale communities the loss of just four or five key fighting men could change local balances of power; the loss of ten could destroy a clan's capacity to defend itself. Just why some of the population changes were so great is unclear. Woodlark and Misima Island had broadly similar histories of contact with goldminers, planters, missionaries and government officers all having their influence. Soon after 1900, both islands had populations of around 2,500, but by the 1930s there were 3000 on Misima and 800 on Woodlark and by self-government there were about 6000 on Misima to 1200 on Woodlark (Nelson 1976, pp.45-46 and 72.). People whose dialect was the one chosen by missionaries to be used as the basis for translations were handed a cultural advantage; and that advantage increased for those whose language became a lingua franca of mission or government.

Inevitably, the foreigners arrived at an arbitrary point in the local cycle of wars, religious movements, disease and natural events such

as drought, flood, mudslides, and plant pests. Relative strengths tended to be fixed at the time that the colonial government established its authority: the recently defeated saw their enemies confirmed in possession of lands they had just been forced to flee, and the confident and expanding clans saw their ambitions thwarted. Individuals and communities immediately began to manipulate and influence the foreigners to their advantage. One of the misconceptions of foreigners at pacification, particularly in those areas where there was extensive fighting, was that the basic division was between villagers and the colonial power. In fact, that was rarely the case. In the Northern Division (later Oro Province) in the late 1890s and early 1900s when colonial officers used the vocabulary of war and forty Orokaiva and Binandere warriors died in single battles between riflemen and spearmen, many villagers thought that their permanent self-interest was their relative wealth and strength measured against their traditional rivals and allies. They aided the government forces against their clan enemies, and quickly realised that they had to have influence and power within the government. Those trying to use government power to their own advantage volunteered as guides and carriers, and soon they were working as interpreters and police (Nelson 1976, chapt 9).

Determining who were winners and losers following the intervention of foreigners could require fine calculation. When a mission teacher arrived in a village he might make initial contact with a clan or subclan and that could then determine whose land became the site of the first church, and whose children were first educated by the mission. In the village it would be recognised that the church 'belonged' more to some than to others, and that some had a greater right to speak for the church than others. The location of roads, government rest houses and schools, and the appointment of individuals as village officials all increased the relative prestige and/or material advantage of families and clans. In intensely competitive small scale communities there were always ambitious men seeking to replace established leaders and clans measuring their strength against others, and every new venture — a cooperative store, a local government council, a coffee plantation or a women's club — offered comparative gains and losses.

Since Independence all foreign intervention has continued to bring greater benefits to some rather than others. This has been true whether the intervention has been at the level of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

(RAMSI) or the provision of a water supply to a remote village. The Apex Club members who supplied the pipes and did much of the work can reasonably think that the water supply is to the advantage of all residents of the village. But one individual or family can claim to have made the connection with the Apexians, to have provided most food for the visitors and had the tap placed on their land. One day, someone might be unwise to boast about how they brought the water, and a little later the pipes are vandalised and left unrepaired. The water supply might have benefited all, but it benefited some more than others.

Where there is a major intervention in the capital, then the very demands that have led to the intervention will mean that the government is in urgent need of reform: poor decisions will have been made, some elected members of government will have been grossly incompetent or corrupt, and various key institutions from the treasury to the police will have been implicated. But the incoming force will have to work with some of the compromised leaders, particularly where the intervention is based on the convenient fiction or reality that it has arrived at the request of the legitimate government. It would seem absurd for an intervening force to claim its power rested on a request of a government which it stripped of power. And as with the arrival of the colonial power a century or so earlier, those who are in ascendant at the time of the intervention and do not choose violent confrontation are likely to be the winners.

THE STATE WITH VOLATILE CITIES

In April 2006 Honiara was suddenly taken over by mobs and much of Chinatown was burnt. In spite of the presence of RAMSI force there was no prior intelligence and given the speed and intensity of mob action initial police response could only be directed towards saving those most under threat. Through the first hours, there was no chance of suppressing the rioters or arresting of leaders. A few days later, Dili was in turmoil as soldiers who had been dismissed from the army were joined by disaffected young men keen to burn and loot. In his book on the Sandline Affair, Sean Dorney heads the chapter on events in Port Moresby in March 1997, 'Days of Havoc' (Dorney 2001, pp.287-308). From the first coup led by Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987, control of Suva has been critical in the making and unmaking of governments. The coups and attempted coups in Suva are different because of the division

between Indo-Fijians and Fijians and the power of the armed forces to carry out or thwart coups. In Fiji, it is not the sudden mobilisation of people within the town that redirects national politics. But that aside, the volatile towns have been, and will be, significant in national politics.

The speed with which the mob assembles and shifts from shouting to violence is surprising because it is in apparent defiance of the geography of the towns and the lack of political beliefs and organisation of those involved. The towns tend to be spread out, with concentrations here and there. In Port Moresby it is over ten kilometres from Gerehu to Boroko and another six to the old centre of town; and the parliament house, blockaded by protesters in the Sandline affair, is separated from the closest residential areas of Waigani, Morata and Tokarara. There are no narrow streets lined by multi-storeyed tenements. There are no extremist parties of the left or right to call out the bother boys and provide them with an ideology and justification. No one charismatic leader has the ability to attract and fire up the mob. And all of that makes the mob much less predictable.

In the Melanesian towns there are disproportionate numbers of young men; they are unemployed or underemployed; and many have associations with each other through their place of origin, the suburb or squatter camp in which they live, or because they are in or on the margins of *raskol* gangs, or they are in looser groups who knock around together. The young men may not have a coherent political program and only vague ideas of who their enemies might be, but they have general grievances arising from their poverty, their few opportunities to better themselves, resentment at the conspicuous wealth of a few (many of whom are foreigners) and at the corruption and inefficiency that they see around them. Political and other leaders, who are connected to them by opportunism and ethnicity, are certainly ready to exploit them in elections or at other times when they need an intimidating show of support; but apart from an immediate aim to secure a position, overturn a decision or unseat an opponent, the politicians and the mob have only the broadest of aims in common.

The young men have no vested interest in the town: they themselves own little, most do not think of themselves as belonging to the town, and their families have no stake in business or property in the town. There is no countervailing force of a strong middle class. Many rioters will not be condemned by those in their home communities, whether they come from a poor

suburb or a distant village. Some police, army and men from private security firms are likely to join the protest, adding to the chance that firearms will be used. Several times, Port Moresby students have resorted to violent protest, on one occasion at the University of Papua New Guinea setting up road blocks and torching a dozen government vehicles. Except for student allowances, examinations and other issues of immediate importance to students, the campus is most likely to be in turmoil when basic questions such as land are being debated. In combination with teachers college and other students, the university students can be formidable, and have forced change on the government. An alliance of students, unemployed, *raskols*, disaffected members of the uniformed services and unprincipled politicians could quickly cause havoc; but because of the dispersed nature of Port Moresby and many other Melanesian towns it would be likely that parts of the town would be by-passed, other towns would not be affected and most rural areas would be untroubled and unconcerned. The parliament of a nation or a province could be under siege, without the 'state' being at risk. But the implications for foreign governments might be immediate if they have their own nationals under threat — or being killed.

THE STATE WITH PATCHES OF PEACE AND PROGRESS

For many Melanesians, the single-word descriptions applied to their nation have no relationship with their own home districts. That should be no surprise to anyone who has looked at the variation in basic indicators across national maps. In Papua New Guinea, for example, in Central, East New Britain, Manus and Milne Bay over 85% of those aged seven to twelve are enrolled in schools. By contrast in the Southern Highlands about 50% are in the schools, and that probably overstates the number. Where 80% or more of the people in Manus and East New Britain are literate, in Enga, Southern Highlands and the Western Highlands less than 38% are literate. Even within provinces there are sharp differences so that in East New Britain districts range from among the most advantaged in terms of income, access to services and child health (Gazelle) to those who are among the most disadvantaged (Pomio) (Hansen, Table 9).

History has added to the diversity influenced by geography. At independence some groups had had over 75 years of colonial rule and mission

teaching and no one could remember a time when there was no central government and no church. Some families had three generations who were literate. But at independence nearly a third of Papua New Guineans had had no more than a generation of representatives of state and church in their villages. They were then lightly touched by and lightly connected to the outside world, and their values were predominantly those from before contact. Even had the impossible happened and Melanesian communities encountered a uniform foreign force they would have had varied histories. Their own values, practices, numbers and economies differed greatly so that some people would have immediately reached an accommodation, others fought openly and briefly and yet others sustained a long, intermittent guerrilla resistance. As it was, all of that happened within a few miles of Port Moresby. The map of Melanesia is a patchwork of cultural groups, most without political cohesion, and history has sharpened those differences as much as it has increased consciousness of the wider group and provided experiences in common.

The result has been that even when conditions have appeared at their most bleak (while war was going on in Bougainville, Honiara immediately before the arrival of RAMSI Force, Port Moresby at the time of the Sandline riots and during the last months of the Skate government) many provinces and parts of provinces have been untouched — or, as in the Southern Highlands, been engaged in greater troubles of their own. There are always areas where there is peace, where public buildings such as churches are painted and maintained, and people have a sense of progress: more people have canoes or dinghies powered by outboard motors and houses made of milled timber, more children are going away for higher education, and there is an increasing knowledge of, and connection with, a wider world — evident in the number who speak English or *tok pisin*. The areas of peace and progress vary (in the mid 1980s Bougainville would have been seen as one of the most successful of the provinces), but some districts (such as much of Milne Bay) have consistently been free of turmoil. Too often the areas of peace and/or progress are simply noted as exceptions; but they are both quantitatively and politically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

The convenient single- and two-word summaries — at-risk, weak, fragile, broken-backed, failed — tell us little about Melanesian states. Beginning slowly in the 1880s and accelerating in the 1930s through to the 1960s, the state came to different peoples at different times. It was often intermittent and limited in function. By the end of the colonial period almost no villages had electricity, water on tap, a postal service, or a policeman and about half had a school. Because different peoples responded in different ways to ‘government’, people have had varied relationships with the state, ranging from a rapid accommodation to a long guerrilla war. For some people the church (introduced, their own or a hybrid) has always been more important than the government in providing services, linking them to a wider community and explaining the rest of the world to them. For nearly all peoples ‘government’ in the colonial and post-colonial state has been imposed, enticed or captured: it has almost never been a result of policy debate, decision by democratically elected representatives and its imposts and benefits imposed universally. Governments, like mines, logging companies and plantations, result in advantage and handicap.

A starting point in any attempt to help Melanesian nations provide good government for their citizens is an understanding of those states as they are now. There can be no obliteration of the past and present and a new start. Theories and classifications imported from elsewhere may be informative, but they will never be sufficient. If the characteristics of the state are close to what has been briefly described then it seems likely that:

- Free, democratic elections will not automatically lead to better government. A nation-wide election is a complex operation, and a state that extends no other services nationwide will have difficulty establishing an accurate roll and conducting an election. The candidates are likely to be elected by, and seen to represent, a small minority in the electorate, candidates found to have acted corruptly and scandalously in the capital will be re-elected by their home constituents, and favours, rather than party affiliation or policies, will bind governments together. Governments that should stand against corruption are themselves corrupting.
- With many people outside the state or receiving few services from the state, a crisis leading to a paralysis of government in Port Moresby or the occasional decline and suspension of a provincial government is inconvenient rather than disastrous for most villagers.
- Given the inability of many government departments and agencies to carry out basic functions — such as keep files on employees and pay and promote them — there is not much point expecting them to implement a major reorganisation or a re-direction of policy. And there is a chance that a concentration on policy will take the attention of the most able senior members of a department, absorb limited resources, and further limit performance. The urgent need is to ensure that a public service section is able to carry out the function that that section was established to do.
- If liberal democracy, capitalism and free market histories are the end of history, then the Melanesian states still have much history to travel (Fukuyama). An immediate, nominal imposition of the end, or a part of the end, is not going to benefit most citizens. The immediate need is for the Melanesian states to ensure that their history includes incremental steps to improve the lot of their peoples as they head towards constantly evolving ends of as yet ill-defined free, liberal and prosperous nations.
- In states where in the past the assets of government have been captured by some, where the government is almost the only source of wealth or means to social or economic advance, and where predatory citizens aim to transfer government capital to their private accounts, then overseas aid is likely to be a target of groups and individuals. Leaders may well be measured by their success in directing goods and services to the few and not to all.
- If there are many people living beyond the reach of the state — residents in the optional state, or who receive few state services, or are serviced by an alternate state — then there needs to be a new conception of what a state is. It is not something that runs from border to border, and it does not provide services for all its citizens. Currently, Papua New

Guinea provides no schools for a quarter of children of primary school age. While that particular fact is well known, what it means for the conception of the state that does so little for so many citizens is unclear. The state simply does not, and cannot, treat citizens equally.

- There has been much comment on weaknesses of government at the national, the provincial and local level. There has been less concern with the traditional or customary systems of government at the village level. But it was those systems that made most decisions for most people through the colonial period, and they are still significant in spite of the range of church and government officers who have been appointed. For many people, problems of law and order are more a result of the failure of the customary system, and less a failure of the various levels of introduced government. Those commentators who have called for a welding together of the customary and introduced governments may well be right, but they should be aware that the customary system is in need of repair. An efficient imposed system will not be enough.
- A well-resourced and efficient police service may well be a prerequisite of law and order. But the securing of more than a temporary condition of law and order while the police are actually present is dependent on an effective system of local government, and neither the introduced nor customary system is currently able to provide that.
- The towns are likely to continue to be sites of sudden violence. Because of the speed with which the mob gathers, the opportunistic alliances that are involved, the lack of formal organisation and the absence of political aims beyond the immediate, the authorities are unlikely to have much warning.
- The rise of an unscrupulous leader able to unite the restless and disaffected in the towns behind a coherent program of rebellion could happen quickly, but while that might result in the destruction of property, lives and a government, much of the rest of the nation will remain largely untouched.

- Outside donors who have wanted to get aid to people have used non-government agencies, and companies wishing to invest in the Melanesian states have taken over the functions of government. In the case of emergencies, such as a natural disaster, it may be necessary to use whatever means are available to get help to those in need, and it is hard to argue against a mining company providing services when a community would otherwise go without, but there is no doubt that the state and nation are diminished by the provision of basic services by other means. Aid programs are being developed to strengthen the state and the sense of nationalism while those services that might come through the state come by other means. This is clearly contradictory.
- There is always alternative advice being given. It may be from plausible rogues, or from single issue political movements or churches or what may be seen as extremist movements in their country of origin. Those who present a well-argued case for what might be practical and well-founded advice, should not be surprised when it is not immediately accepted.
- Concessions to particular groups who make aggressive demands for compensation are destructive of the notion of the state's obligations to treat all citizens equally, and they encourage further demands for special treatment.
- Outside intervention, whether a small scale project to help one village or an international force to rescue a state, is never neutral. Some people gain and others lose. In small-scale competitive communities where people constantly measure themselves against others, those rises and falls in fortune are closely observed and keenly felt.
- Many of the long term grievances of people are concerned with land — in Port Moresby, Lae, Madang, Mt Hagen, the Gazelle Peninsula, and so on. This is land that was alienated many years ago, its sale has often been reconsidered, and it still leads to violent confrontations. This is a clear warning to those who think that legislation and titles may solve land questions.

- The reporting of turmoil, crime, corruption and government inefficiency always overwhelms any recognition of the extensive areas of peace and progress. Some areas of low income and few government services are among the most peaceful. The increased economic opportunities that the people want and have a right to pursue can come at social cost.

The aim in setting out characteristics of the Melanesian state has been to go beyond the brief and superficial descriptions that are frequently applied. If others add and amend, then it should be possible to establish defensible generalisations, and at the same time say something about what is increasing and decreasing and what forces are driving change.

AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This paper was presented at a State, Society and Governance in Melanesia seminar on 18 May 2006 at the Australian National University.
- ² The United Nations has suggested that Papua New Guinea be downgraded from 'developing country' to 'least developed country'. The Prime Minister reacted sharply to the change in classification (*National*, 10 May 2006).
- ³ R.J. May, 'Weak States, Collapsed States, Broken-Backed States and Kleptocracies: General Concepts and Pacific Realities', in *The New Pacific Review: La Nouvelle Revue Du Pacifique: L'Etat des Etats — Pacific Island States Today*, Vol 2 No 1, 2003, pp.35-58, follows the same introduction by using Tinker — perhaps indicative of our shared introduction to the topic. May also gives an excellent summary of subsequent main conceptions of the post-colonial state, most based on African experience.
- ⁴ *The Contribution of Australian Aid to Papua New Guinea's development 1975-2000*, Evaluation and Review Series No 34, June 2003, AusAID, Canberra, p.9 says that less than 70% rural aid posts were operating in 1999.
- ⁵ 'Theocracy' was normally used ironically or with conscious exaggeration.
- ⁶ See also the report on the road block at Konapugl directed against Pangia people (*National*, 28 April 2006); and the road blocks on the Sialum Highway were said to be by 'gun-wielding criminals' acting in defiance of local leaders (*National*, 19 April 2006).
- ⁷ Philip Kapai at a rally in Banz said that the people of Jiwaka were 'peace loving' (*National*, 27 April 2006).
- ⁸ The repaired Popondetta secondary school was damaged by fire, and much new equipment lost (*National*, 7 Feb 2006).
- ⁹ Note the recent complaint of the Papua New Guinea Teachers Association Sandaun branch which claimed that there was 'no proper recording or filing of information on salaries in the province' (*National*, 2 June 2006).
- ¹⁰ This was written before the general scene presented here was repeated twice in Solomon Islands.
- ¹¹ *The Contribution of Australian Aid to Papua New Guinea's development 1975-2000*, p.10, writes of 'ethno-political groups each with its own distinctive cultural attributes'. It is not clear what the 'distinctive cultural attributes' one clan might have to distinguish it from another.
- ¹² Peter Ekeh, a Nigerian, has made the point that many Africans think it is legitimate to rob the state to benefit the traditional or 'primoidal' group. The argument here is that the state is often the only source of the means for the group to transform itself by gaining the services of the state and the wealth that they see in the hands of a few. They are not so much strengthening the traditional group, but aiming to modernise or give brief privilege to a small part of it.
- ¹³ At Mt Hagen the landowners near a treatment plant 'have again' shut down the water supply because they said they had not received payment for the land (*National*, 28 April 2006). The Motu Koita Council said that the payments made to the Council were insufficient to cover their losses of land and resources taken for the development of the city of Port Moresby. They were 'beggars in our own land' (*National*, 27 April 2006). In Madang, Banim villagers have threatened to shut off the water supply claiming that the treatment plants pollutes local water (*Post-Courier*, 20 April 2006). Radio Southern Highlands has been off the air from March 2006 because the people on whose land the transmitter is built have demanded compensation (*National*, 14 June 2006).

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