

## **Submission to inquiry into supporting democracy in our region Electoral/parliamentary reform**

Michael Pepperday December 2022

This submission concerns democracy in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It asserts that the electoral structure of those countries cannot be stable and suggests the adoption of proportional representation (PR).

I am retired, living in Port Macquarie, NSW. I used to be a surveyor and a businessman. I have late-life masters (UWA 2003) and PhD (ANU 2009) degrees in political science. The masters thesis explains the 1987 adoption of PR in the Western Australian upper house. The PhD is a theoretical thesis on political culture. The two quite unrelated thesis topics meet in this submission.

### **Summary**

The political disorder in PNG and Solomon Islands is basically caused by having a single chamber of parliament comprised of single-member electorates. This design has never worked in any country and should never have been installed. For a stable democracy, these countries must either acquire a second chamber or, preferably, convert the unicameral parliament to PR. Australian authorities are, however, convinced the problem of political disorder is caused by Melanesian culture and they do not support system reform; their support would be needed for reform to occur.

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## 1. Introduction

There are two general designs of electoral systems: single-member electorates and multi-member proportional representation (PR). That is, either:

- each representative in the legislature is elected to be the exclusive representative of the people of a specific district (such as in most Australian lower houses), or else
- several people are elected to collectively represent the inhabitants of a much larger area (as in most Australian upper houses). The number of representatives per electorate is at least 5, usually more.

Variations of detail of these two general designs are not discussed in this submission.

The parliaments of PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu consist of a single legislative chamber composed of single-member electorates. Though political scientists do feel that this structure is defective, it is not generally appreciated that it never works, that it cannot work.

## 2. Evidence round the world

There are successful, unicameral democracies; they are all PR: Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Malta, Portugal, Sweden.

There are some successful democracies with single-member electorates; they are all bicameral: Australia, Botswana, Canada, France, India, Jamaica, UK, USA.

There are no successful, unicameral democracies with single-member electorates.

(Other successful democracies are both PR and bicameral. My reference here is the 1999 edition of Lijphart's *Patterns of Democracy* but any source would do.)

As far as I know, no non-PR unicameral parliament has worked in any country. It didn't work in New Zealand, didn't work in Northern Ireland, didn't work in Africa, and is not working in Hungary. England tried it in 1649 and gave it up in 1660. The pattern of the established democracies indicates the structure of viable parliamentary government:

- if the MPs are elected in single-member districts, parliament must be bicameral;
- if the parliament is unicameral, elections must be multi-member PR.

Single-member districts are poisonous; a second chamber is an antidote; PR is a cure.

There is an alternative to parliamentary rule: a presidential system where the chief executive is popularly elected. It also does not work. See Appendix 1.

It is not just a matter of empirical evidence. The reasons for the unicameral majoritarian failure are long known. Sir Arthur Lewis discussed them in 1965 in his *Politics in West Africa*. No one took notice and the consequences were horrific. The root problem is an aspect of the human condition: concentration of power. Where the governing party holds a majority and controls the unicameral house, separation of powers is negated. Without the curb of a second chamber, politicians raid the treasury, cronies are rewarded, civil servants take bribes, the winner-take-all competition aggravates ethnic or cultural antagonisms, elections either lurch erratically or change nothing, ordinary lives are ruined.

Though the upper houses of Britain and Canada are quite undemocratic (as was New Zealand's) and formally rather powerless, they suffice to prevent the lower house from turning into an "elected dictatorship" (the term of former New Zealand PM Geoffrey Palmer). The same applies to Botswana's House of Chiefs. NZ abolished its upper house in 1950 and about the same time, Sweden and Denmark abolished theirs but, unlike NZ, they did not spend the next 40 years having political conniptions—because their lower houses were already PR. If the house of government is PR, then an upper house is superfluous unless the country is a federation.

To have a chance at viable democracy, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu must either get an upper house or switch to a multi-member PR electoral system.

It is hard to imagine them introducing a second chamber: lower house MPs loathe upper houses. Besides, what is to stop a Sogavare buying the upper house MPs as well as the lower? That is essentially what Premier Brian Burke did in Western Australia during the “WA Inc” power abuses in the mid 1980s. Nor will these countries abandon the parliamentary system and adopt presidentialism though Sogavare, following Erdogan, would probably like to. In short: PR it has to be.

With large, multi-member electoral districts, local ethnicities lose salience because candidates must seek broad support. To get that support they generally need the help of a party—which strengthens parties. At present, the logging company can bribe the local member; with a multi-member electorate, it must bribe all of them which is awkward when they belong to competing parties with published policies. PR changes priorities and incentives because under PR an MP represents a social program or an ideological preference rather than a geographical area or an ethnic identity.

### **3. Some consequences of the defective system**

PNG, Solomons, and Vanuatu have not experienced the horrors of post-colonial Africa, with the major exception of the fighting in Bougainville. It is notorious that the abuse there was conducted with Australian-supplied machine guns shooting from Australian-supplied helicopters; it is entirely unrecognised that the Australian-supplied electoral system was the root cause of the war.

The Pacific peacefulness (relative to Africa) would be largely due to the influence of Australia and New Zealand. The Solomons’ treaty with China a few months ago triggered criticism of Australia’s diplomatic neglect of the Pacific and there has been a flurry of activity to compensate. But Australia (and the USA) can hardly compensate by making the sort of direct cash payments which China makes to politicians in the Solomons—as revealed by the *4 Corners* program, “Buying the Solomons”—so help to these countries would have to consist of helping them withstand corruption. And that requires a viable political system. The *4 Corners* program is at

<https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/pacific-capture:-how-chinese-money-is-buying-the/13998414>

The TV program seems to blame Sogavare personally. An effective political system copes with the Sogavares of the world. Such blaming is common in the academic literature, too. Pacific specialists say political behaviour must change before institutional reform but behaviour reflects incentives and incentives are created by institutions. Effective political systems do not rely on politicians being nice.

Those who compete for political office in PNG behave as they do in order to get elected and to survive. And because the situation, including personal positions, is so unstable it is logical to salt away their gains in Australian real estate. After all, that is what their Australian advisors do.

### **4. Where does the single-member unicameral design come from?**

When self-government was granted to Australasia the colonies were all made bicameral. Where, in the 1970s, did the colonial authorities get the idea a country could be governed with a single chamber made of single-member electorates? What were their models? At the time, the only Australian instance was Queensland—which was seriously corrupt. World-

wide, there were only two democratic examples. One was New Zealand, unicameral for two decades and regretting it even more than it had regretted the former bicameral parliament. The other was Northern Ireland, which was in flames. Other majoritarian, unicameral countries were Mauritius, then under a state of emergency, and some catastrophic African states.

Why did the British install this structure in Africa? In view of the consequences there, why would they repeat it in the Pacific? Why did Australia abolish PNG's Legislative Council? Why were the two houses of the Solomons combined? What were they thinking? I don't know the answers. The pros and cons of bicameralism have been debated for over 200 years but, apparently, Canberra and the other colonial authorities paid no mind; it looks as though they just casually experimented—on millions of people.

It is not a secret that a unicameral legislature must be multi-member PR. Though PR is Continental and quite un-Anglo, Whitehall knew there was no alternative for Northern Ireland. The devolutions of Wales and Scotland are also unicameral PR, as is Greater London. I don't think there was such clear recognition in NZ which, in the face of bitter opposition and obstruction from its politicians, eventually managed to adopt West German PR in 1993.

In effect, the Solomons, PNG and Vanuatu are competing to be the first country to make the unicameral, single-member structure work. What are their chances when modern, wealthy countries with a history of democracy can't make it work? The RAMSI website said it was laying foundations for long-term stability but did not touch the electoral system. See Appendix 2 for more on the RAMSI failure.

Solomon Islands may be lost. It has become part of China's Global Security Initiative and it looks like it will fall into the BRI debt trap. The people themselves don't want anything to do with China and that implies more street demonstrations. These can then be suppressed violently which will provoke rioting and then China can restore order with water cannon, surveillance cameras, and media restrictions.

## **5. Reform is nobody's business; perverse incentives**

Helping these countries become robust democracies is surely in Australia's interest. After WW1, Woodrow Wilson thought that US security would be best served if other nations were democratic; after WW2 the Truman doctrine rested on the same idea and after 9/11 George W Bush also asserted it. Truman succeeded in creating democracies and it seems to have worked. Democracies never war against each other.

The notion has not been prominent in Australia (this inquiry excepted). In part, the reticence would be due to a fear of appearing to be an interfering colonial power. Perhaps we shall just have to wear that criticism. It has to be done if for no other reason than *their* democracy is the only long term way to guarantee *our* security.

System change in the Pacific will need the support of Australia and other foreign parties. On the face of it, it is peculiar that Australia has not long since moved to change the system. But I have expressed my concerns in various Australian venues over the years and found that nobody is particularly interested—not the bureaucrats, not the politicians, not the academics. It seems the matter is not within anyone's remit and I have concluded that the short-term incentives discourage involvement.

AusAID is interested in governance, not government, DFAT is apparently not concerned with other countries' electoral systems, and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute concentrates on military things. Bureaucrats thrive on process, not outcomes, and current arrangements

guarantee many genial jobs managing the consequences of the broken political systems in the South Seas.

In the amoral realm of international relations, tacticians appreciate polities which are defective (where power is concentrated in the executive and institutions are weak) for they are easy to influence. This has been convenient for Australia in the Pacific as it has been for the US in Latin America but as Australia and the US are now finding out, it is also convenient for China. While it should be a happy situation for a developing country to have West and East competing to offer aid, the aid will be skimmed by the local politicians and may further corrupt, rather than help, the receiver country.

Academics, too, don't see another country's electoral reform as their business. The research imperative is to avoid offending influential contacts in those countries, not only with a view to publishing but also to expanding "governance" courses with Pacific Islanders as students and clients. (One reason things went pear-shaped in the Solomons would be that Sogavare is not a protégé of Australia's post-colonial services.)

A recent academic conference discussing the 2022 PNG elections is online at

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcofwBEY58Q&list=PLV6RuTP9s\\_zr\\_he5qbSp9kWcN4S9zfUocp&index=8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcofwBEY58Q&list=PLV6RuTP9s_zr_he5qbSp9kWcN4S9zfUocp&index=8)

It is basically a tale of woe (a list of woes is at 1:00:30). Some recommendations (at 14:50) include: committing funding, writing a report, developing a complaints process, prosecuting corrupt officials, setting up an advisory committee. Neither woes nor recommendations mention gender imbalance (see Appendix 3) or the dysfunctional electoral structure.

To enumerate the proximate problems is like pointing out the cracks in the plaster. They have to be patched. They will then crack again requiring more patching. In Melanesia this has been going on for half a century and the house has become very rickety. If the foundations are not repaired, sooner or later the structure will collapse.

Through the decades, the Canberra culture of bureaucratic busyness, the "realist" international relations manoeuvring, and the academic hustle, would have helped sustain those Pacific polities but the disorder keeps getting worse and the polities are in a permanent state of dependency.

The vested interest Australian agencies have in keeping Pacific polities crippled should be recognised and addressed for those agencies' support will be needed to bring about reform.

## 6. The culture excuse

The lack of progress is clear to everyone but no one sees it as Australia's (or New Zealand's) fault. Instead, the failure is universally and comprehensively explained by "culture"—*their* culture. Though perverse incentives are an obstacle to Australian agencies initiating system change, a bigger obstacle is Australian prejudice.

It is hard to overstate the problem—see Appendix 4 for some illustrative examples. The conviction that the fault lies with culture is so ingrained that it makes no impression to point out that unicameral majoritarian parliaments have not worked with *any* culture. The explanation of defective Melanesian culture is taken for granted and since everyone knows the culture is the real problem, reforming the electoral system is dismissed as a digression.

This belief in cultural inferiority is also accepted by educated Melanesians.

What scholarship supports this criticism of culture? Are the theories of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Weber, Etzioni, Marriott, Douglas, Fiske, or economics drawn on? Nothing of the sort. Apparently, the defects of Melanesian culture are so obvious that

scholarly reference is superfluous. Criticism often consists of anecdotes with all the depth of a nineteenth century plantation manager holding forth on the idiosyncrasies of the natives.

Does culture play a role? Presumably it plays a role in everything. Perhaps it is one reason New Zealand after 1950 didn't get as bad as Northern Ireland. But NI's Catholic-Protestant cleavage doesn't really explain since it is present in most of Europe. Europe has PR. In Belgium today the divide is at least as severe as in Ireland yet people are not throwing bombs. Everyone thought the Irish "Troubles" (30 years, 3000 dead) were caused by religion yet all went quiet after a PR electoral system was introduced. The disorder in Melanesia no more lies with big-manism or wantokism than it lay with religion in Northern Ireland.

Does tribal society make it harder to introduce democracy? The scholarship says no (Appendix 4) and tribalism could never really explain: Botswana is tribal. Conversely, the post-Soviet countries are not tribal yet those that adopted presidentialism have all failed (most parliamentary ones are managing). Latin America is not tribal but those countries cannot sustain democracy and though most of them have been independent far longer than Australia and New Zealand, they are called "developing countries" and they are pervasively, and apparently incorrigibly, corrupt.

Blaming culture is a copout, a buck-passing way to justify lack of progress. The coloniser imposed a unworkable political structure and now blames the subject people for not fitting in with it. It is like blaming the weather if the roof leaks. The people do not have a duty to conform to any political structure, let alone one which is universally dysfunctional. The very point of politics is to cope with people and their culture.

It is common—indeed, it is considered a truism—to assert that a political system should suit the local culture. Evidence is never given and I doubt the assertion makes much sense. I struggle to think of an example but perhaps it is plausible to imagine that upper houses like England's House of Lords or Botswana's House of Chiefs would not suit Australian culture. If so, we may conclude: (a) a concession to culture is a deficit to democracy; (b) England and Botswana have the same culture.

The various democratic institutional designs were worked out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are universal; they contain no cultural content. The reason New Zealand and Germany have the same PR electoral system is not because they share the same culture. One harped-on "proof" of Melanesian cultural inadequacy is its alleged inability to fit into the Westminster system. But Westminster has not been tried; Westminster has an upper house.

Given a viable democratic framework, entrepreneurial, big-man, competitive individualism would promote common prosperity. Given a viable political framework, ethnic loyalty could shed its extreme parochialism and promote public welfare.

I think the only Pacific writer I ever came across who took issue with the culture thesis was Tobias Haque, World Bank economist. He lived and worked in Solomon Islands during 2009 and 2010 and wrote an ANU discussion paper in 2012.

[https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2015-12/2012\\_03\\_tobias\\_a\\_haque\\_0.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2015-12/2012_03_tobias_a_haque_0.pdf)

Some excerpts:

Understanding poor outcomes in Solomon Islands as the result of perverse material incentives facing individuals, rather than a result of the local culture, is more useful from a policy perspective and avoids the unjustified problematising of Solomon Islands culture.

The ultimate cause of much of this dysfunction is the absence of institutional structures ensuring ministers' accountability

....a key priority for long-term development in Solomon Islands must be the introduction of a reformed electoral system that broadens accountability of MPs to a larger and more geographically dispersed range of constituents.

Broadening of MPs' accountability to a larger range of constituents is exactly what PR does. Haque identified this "key priority" ten years ago.

The switch to PR is essential. The task of the political system is to cope with the culture and PR can do it. Whatever the effects of culture, it is no reason to trap a country in a system that has never been made to work.

## **7. A dark prognosis**

It took about 40 years for Northern Ireland to blow up and another 30 years of occupation by English troops to settle it down. The crisis in New Zealand took about 30 years to build and another 10 to resolve. Solomon Islands, never a happy place, has taken about 45 years to reach a tipping point. How long before PNG snaps (again)? How long can PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu continue to let corruption deepen, let health services decline, let the environment be wrecked, let the infrastructure rot, let crime and violence persist?

What will happen? Ethnic strife? Insurrection? Coup d'état? Military rule? In resource-rich PNG, a repressive regime might make itself as impervious as that in Myanmar. We might expect Torrens title, resource plunder, environmental devastation and, on Bougainville, genocide. Then, if events proceed normally, after another 40 years we will grant immunity to the elderly thugs, hold a Truth and Reconciliation inquiry, repatriate the refugees from the Queensland camps, excavate the mass graves, and spend decades trying to put a traumatised, impoverished country together.

The introduction of PR is a chance to avoid this dire scenario. The current arrangement is for the Melanesian countries to remain "developing" and propped up by Australia. That plan staggered along for decades but China's arrival in the region has reduced Australia to hoping the prime ministers will be Australia-friendly.

At [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proportional\\_representation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proportional_representation) 76 countries are listed as having a PR electoral system. So PR does not guarantee success. PR is a foundation for success. A sound foundation does not prevent the roof falling in but an unsound one guarantees the roof will fall. The electoral foundation shapes parliament which shapes the executive which shapes the administration which shapes management. Of the world's successful democracies, most have a PR foundation (and the others have a second chamber).

## **8. Bringing about structural change**

One reason people shy away from electoral reform is because it is so daunting. Apart from the inertia of any established structure or process, the political actors who must effect the change are prospering under the current system so have difficulty seeing the need.

Advocating electoral reform is not a good career move for a politician and even if the need is accepted, it gets put off to tomorrow because today's politics must be attended to. Moreover, because day-to-day political squabbling is colourful and dramatic, and election rules are dull and bureaucratic, the media and the public are not interested.

To change the system is hard. To do it, a majority of the politicians in the legislature must vote for it. A vote for PR is a vote to reduce the politicians' power and to increase the people's power. Politicians are professional power-brokers; giving away power is the last thing they do. So it's hard. And yet, over the last two centuries, there have been hundreds of such legislative votes in the world's democracies. To a large extent, such votes constitute the

history of democratic improvement. Countless gerrymanders have been rectified, ombudsmen have been appointed, and central banks and electoral commissions made independent by such a vote.

Five Australian upper houses were switched, one by one, to PR by such a vote: Senate 1949, SA 1973, NSW 1978, WA 1987, Vic 2003, and unicameral ACT did it via a referendum in 1988. Each event has its own story and it was usually a creaking, groaning, whingeing business. (The fundamental reason for the changes is that PR is the sole coherent option for our powerful upper houses.) When the day comes for the vote, a few MPs might support the change on principle, but in general the vote succeeds when a majority in the legislature grudgingly accepts it as the least-worst option.

Why might politicians relinquish power? There is a considerable literature on democratisation of non-democracies and some on institutional change but none specifically on improvement of democracy. I suggest these reasons:

- they made an election promise so emphatic it can't be wriggled out of—as in New Zealand 1994.
- they are paid—as with self-abolition: the Scottish parliament 1707, Queensland Legislative Council 1922, the NZ LC 1950. Another instance is the Solomon Islands opposition MPs postponing an election in 2022. (Perhaps with another payment the postponement can be made indefinite.)
- There arises a combination of forces (which Tocqueville noticed and political scientist Dankwart Rustow elaborated) whereby a precarious legislative majority can *take* a modicum of power from the minority but cannot *hold* it. That is to say, the only way to take it is by transferring it to others: to third party politicians and/or the people. I suspect this is the most frequent reason. It occurred with the 1987 introduction of PR in WA when two mutually antagonistic parties, Labor and Nationals, temporarily combined to outvote the Liberal Party.

How to go about reform? Perhaps a few convinced activists who carry political weight and who are prepared to make themselves unpopular, could take on the task of persuading the main players, namely the MPs and their political circle. Foreign (Australian and New Zealand) influence is pervasive, so its endorsement will be vital. Almost no one will support it initially—in NZ, campaigning for PR took a decade and in WA it took 11 years—but with persistence, new ideas can become accepted.

It will take external pressure from Australia and NZ and internal pressure from activists—and articles, conferences, committees, reports, inquiries, recommendations, referendums, etc. It may be a long road and a rough one. Positive encouragement is provided by New Zealand's successful transition; a spur is provided by the consequences of Sir Arthur Lewis's failure. With persistence and a little luck, it might be done.

## 9. Conclusion

I am inclined to believe that those two parliamentary arrangements—multi-member PR in a unicameral legislature or else a single-member house along with a second chamber—are the only truly viable democratic designs. It would have been easy to have left PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu with one of them at independence and, indeed, one or other should have been the default.

It beggars belief that after all the ambivalences of colonialism, we should declare countries independent and leave them with a government structure which makes stable democracy impossible.



Many rules are needed to make a democracy and those two legislative designs are the ones which might make such rules and stick to them. They appear to be the only political designs that can withstand the incitements and incentives which concentrate power and facilitate corruption.

The good news is that where democracy becomes established, it is tough; it copes with human vicissitudes and international pressures and it does not reverse. Though there are many false starts, the trend over the last two centuries is for democracy to advance, both in number and in quality.

In PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the single-member unicameral structure has done much damage. The introduction of PR is necessary if those countries are to have any chance of democratic success.

Michael Pepperday, December 2022.

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### **Appendix 1. Presidentialism also does not work.**

There is an alternative to parliamentary rule: a presidential system, where the chief executive is elected by the people and does not depend on support from the legislature. It has worked only in the USA. France and Costa Rica might also count as exceptions though that would need qualification.

The presidential design has been failing for up to two centuries in over 60 countries. (For a list see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential_system).)

Direct election of the chief executive sounds democratic but is actually demagogic. The degree of power concentration varies but sooner or later it bites and if the last two centuries of South American politics is any guide, presidential countries are condemned to cycle between spells of comparative flourishing and episodes of oppression and misrule.

The danger is widely recognised and often countered with term limits (which parliamentary systems don't have) but they are not effective. The presidential structure is so dysfunctional that even a PR electoral system (common in presidential countries) can't save it.

If this claim—presidentialism does not work—is correct then some new, putatively democratic countries, such as Indonesia, Poland, South Korea and Ukraine, will lapse into autocracy.

### **Appendix 2. The RAMSI fail**

In 2007 the second in charge of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), Sue Ingram, who had been the Director of the Machinery of Government Program, gave a seminar at the ANU. She said that they did not touch the electoral system because there had been system changes in PNG which did not do any good. She would have been referring to the introduction of “limited preferential voting” and she was right: LPV was fiddling at the edges.

At question time, I pointed out that if RAMSI succeeded, it would be a very significant achievement for it would make the Solomons the first country in the world to succeed with a unicameral parliament consisting of single-member electorates. She was not aware of this. What must she and her colleagues think when they look at Solomon Islands now?

The RAMSI mismanagement is tragic. Structural reform is usually hard because the people who must introduce the new system are the ones benefitting from the current system. So RAMSI had a singular opportunity. PR was even in the air because of its several recent adoptions in the UK and because of New Caledonia's recent introduction of the female parity rule (every second name on each party's PR list must be female).

RAMSI failed, badly, yet in the wake of the Solomons treaty with China, the talk of Australia's diplomatic laxity in the Pacific made no mention of it. This criticism does not apply to the Australian army (which I thought did a good job).

### **Appendix 3. Women in parliament**

Political reform could rectify the gender imbalance at a stroke. New Caledonia has a list-PR electoral system with a rule which says each party list must have alternating men and women. See:

[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Élections\\_provinciales\\_en\\_Nouvelle-Calédonie](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Élections_provinciales_en_Nouvelle-Calédonie)

Scroll to "Conditions générales de constitution de la liste" and see the second item:

"...chaque liste se doit d'alterner une candidature d'homme et une de femme..."

I couldn't find this in English. I don't know the actual proportion of women MPs but it must be a fair number since the major parties each have a substantial number of seats. For that see the 2019 election results at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections\\_in\\_New\\_Caledonia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_New_Caledonia)

It is not foreseeable that PNG's present parliamentary design will provide anything like gender parity. There is not the political will and, anyway, quotas can be criticised as being discriminatory whereas New Caledonia's parity rule favours neither sex.

### **Appendix 4. Cultural bias**

Here are some examples of Australian prejudice. We don't seem to have learnt any lessons about cultural arrogance from our "stolen generation" experience. I have listened to awful assertions in seminars, and academic writing regularly bewails the unsuitability of PNG culture to modern politics.

### **Conference at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r53pAwEegqE>**

In a 2013 talk rich with anecdotes about Pacific cultures, senior academic, Dr Firth, expresses what he calls "theoretical terms" as follows:

[17:12] So two things about Papua New Guinea and the Solomons should not surprise us. It shouldn't surprise us that they remain weak states with a deficit of the effective government authority that is so central to our traditions and so foreign to theirs. Nor should we be surprised that Melanesians have adapted the Westminster system of government to Melanesian ways of doing things with political leaders having little loyalty to ideologies or parties and much loyalty to kin and extended family. [17:41] ... [18:05] The Weberian state with its reach, efficiency, impersonality and neutrality is a product of Western cultural forms and long Western history and cannot be implanted in its entirety or with the same outcomes in other cultural contexts, especially Melanesian ones. [18:25]

It should indeed not surprise us that they are weak states; their single-member electoral structure guarantees it.

It is not the case that they "adapted the Westminster system to Melanesian ways..." They have never seen Westminster. Instead, an unviable political structure was inflicted on them and they have tried to make it work.

No one would suggest Queensland adapts Westminster to Queensland ways. We might, however, concede the Qld government reverted to tradition when it emasculated its anti-corruption body a few years ago. If Qld still had an upper house, that sort of carry-on would

not be possible. The various ICACs probably owe their introduction to the presence of upper houses and they continue to exist because of those upper houses. Think how different federal legislation would be if the Australian Senate did not exist.

This assumption of inferior Melanesian culture has been taught to countless students. It is a prejudice which obscures the obvious: that it is not Westminster. Westminster has an upper house. With Weberian efficiency we ignored our own history and defied all evidence to inflict a travesty of Westminster on Melanesia. And now when it doesn't work—as it never could have—we efficiently blame the victims.

No one blames Hungarian culture for Hungary's present democratic deficits. Do we only blame local culture when it is different from ours?

In that same 2013 video, defence expert Paul Dibb worries [30:48—31:20] that PNG will collapse into disorder and Australia will have the task of rescuing about 30,000 expatriates. Apart from the humanitarian and security imperatives, wouldn't it be easier to fix the system?

***Pillars and shadows: statebuilding as peacebuilding in Solomon Islands (2010) by John Braithwaite, Sinclair Dinnen, Matthew Allen, Valerie Braithwaite and Hilary Charlesworth.*** The authors, who are of formidable reputation, are just as convinced of the problem of culture. The book can be downloaded as a pdf.

We do not conceive [peacebuilding] as a process of following an outside architect's plan to erect core pillars of the state such as law, economic governance and public administration. We will argue that there is little that is generic about statebuilding in Solomon Islands and much that is shadowy in a distinctively Solomons way. (p. 1)

Inasmuch as this concerns the electoral/parliamentary pillar, it is incorrect. The "outside architects" worked it out before the beginning of the twentieth century and it is indeed generic. Culture plays no role in the various designs. Nothing "distinctly Solomons" would require deviation from the generic and certainly no shadowy, distinctly Solomons phenomena would require a single-member unicameral parliament.

The authors explain the concepts of "big man" and "wantok" (one-talk) and say:

Translation of such big-manship into the parliamentary institution has produced a corrupt and unstable form of parliamentary governance. (p. 98)

They then describe the corrupt effects. The corruption is not from the translation of the faulty culture into the parliament but the opposite: it is from the imposition of a faulty parliament on the culture. A unicameral parliament of single-member electorates will always produce corruption and instability; big-manship is irrelevant.

However ghastly Melanesian culture may be, it makes no sense to afflict it with a political structure which never works with any culture.

Wantokism is tribalism. That politicians pay those who vote for them is as much Tammany Hall as it is Melanesia. It is corruption and should be trodden on. But that caricature of Westminster cannot tread on it; it can only aggravate it.

Ultimately, the problem is driven both by politicians demanding ever-larger discretionary funds and by citizens of Solomon Islands who drive this political culture ... in accordance with Melanesian social norms of obligation and reciprocity. (pp. 98-99)

Those naughty politicians! The problem is not driven by Melanesian politicians, not driven by Melanesian citizens; it is driven by single-member electorates, just as it was in Northern Ireland and in New Zealand. Canberra citizens point the finger at Melanesian social norms

when the real problem is the system which was installed by Canberra politicians and which sustains Canberra norms of bureaucratic activity and academic research.

The authors go on to describe how poorly educated the population is. Everything is grist to the blame-the-victim mill. It's all the Melanesians' fault. In reality this is making excuses for the decades of failure.

**In *State and society in Papua New Guinea* (2004, p. 16) RJ May says, “What is needed, however, is less institutional reform than a fundamental shift in patterns of political behaviour.”**

This opinion directly contradicts the scholarship. Here, for example, is the OUP advertising blurb for *Institutions and Democratic Citizenship* (2001) by Axel Hadenius:

Its primary conclusion is that democracy is not the product of social and economic forces, yet, to a greater extent, it is the consequence of prevailing institutional conditions, i.e. the nature of the state.

So—institutional conditions, not culture.

Or consider the final paragraph of “Electoral Institutions, Ethnopolitical Cleavages, and Party Systems in Africa’s Emerging Democracies” by Shaheen Mozaffar, James R Scarritt, Glen Galaich. *The American Political Science Review*. 2003. 97 (3), 379:

Finally, our analysis suggests that no intrinsic antipathy exists between ethnopolitical diversity and democratic stability in Africa or, for that matter, elsewhere. Claims of such antipathy typically posit a reflexive relationship between ethnicity and democracy that is grossly misconstrued, rests on the fundamentally flawed primordialist conception of ethnicity, and reflects an odious one-dimensional view of ethnic identities.

It couldn't be clearer: “no intrinsic antipathy exists between ethnopolitical diversity and democratic stability.” With “Claims of ... a reflexive relationship between ethnicity and democracy ... [are] grossly misconstrued ... an odious ... view of ethnic identities.” the authors could be talking about Australian agencies and Pacific ethnicities.

Behaviour reflects incentives and incentives are set by social institutions. Those who compete for political office in PNG behave as they do in order to get elected and to survive.

It is unseemly to wag the finger at perceived failure of a foreign culture and we do a serious wrong when the failure is actually our fault—namely, our imposition of unviable institutions.

## **Appendix 5. Number of MPs**

The introduction of PR is likely to mean an increase in the number of MPs. That would be a good thing. For optimal representation, the number of politicians should equal the cube root of twice the number of voters—which is roughly the cube root of the population. This is not universally known; see *Seats and Votes* by Taagepera and Shugart who provide both theoretical derivation and empirical confirmation.

Regarding PNG, the cube root of 8 million is 200. Few would greet the notion that PNG should double its number of politicians with enthusiasm but that is just more prejudice. Switzerland, with a population of 7 million, has 244 federal MPs and is arguably the world's best-run country. Of course, Swiss politicians don't act like PNG ones: they function within a proper electoral structure.

END OF SUBMISSION