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# Are the current Australian policies towards PNG and the South Pacific a form of ‘recolonisation’?

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## Introduction

There is no argument that current Australian assistance policy towards PNG and the South Pacific (for brevity referred to as the South Pacific) does not technically constitute recolonisation. This implies an issue of sovereignty that is simply not present. However, it is possible to interpret current policy quite harshly, especially in the eyes of the subject governments, and some elements of civil society. This paper will review recent Australian policy developments, examining how these can be interpreted as neo-colonialism, irrespective of Australian Government intent.

The state which is subject to it [neo-colonialism] is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, but in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside (Gwane Nkrumah, Ghanain Statesman quoted in Jin, 2000, p. 2).

Colonialism and especially neo-colonialism are emotionally charged concepts that need careful definition to allow useful discussion. A dictionary definition of a colony is, ‘any people or territory separated from but subject to a ruling power’ (*Macquarie Dictionary*). The ‘essence’ of colonisation is described as ‘unequal rights, separation and deliberate exploitation’ (Evans and Newnham, 1998, p. 80); applied to neo-colonialism they are a harsh test for the current Australian policy in the South Pacific. They do reflect both South Pacific and civil societies’ reported perceptions.

## The evolution of South Pacific assistance policy

The Pacific was viewed as an inherited millstone—but one they were determined to keep under their control. As the multilateral regimes began to falter and a scramble for regional and bilateral deals accompanied by the revival of US imperialism, Australia and New Zealand focused on securing their own small sphere of influence. The desire to recolonise ‘their lake’ now dominates their economic, political and military relationship with their Pacific neighbours (Kelsey, 2004, p. 10).

From about 1988, a policy of ‘constructive commitment’, to allow governments to develop their own aid priorities and direct allocations of aid, was espoused by former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. After 1994, there was a realisation that much aid was being misused, therefore more direct ‘tagging’ of aid to specific economic and political reform agendas was instituted (Regan and May, 2001, p. 150). This is a traditional dilemma for donor nations; see aid money wasted while not interfering in sovereign matters, or risk criticism of interference by demanding value for money. From 1983, a policy of allocating 70–80 per cent of aid money directly to Australian contractors, so called ‘boomerang aid’ was implemented, an existing source of grievance with South Pacific governments (Offley, 1983, p. 176).

An interdepartmental working group in 2000 recommended a more direct role to providing appropriate support for internal security and good governance. This interventionist strategy reflects two intersecting influences. The first is a perception that the international community sees Australia as responsible for political stability and economic progress in the region (DFAT, 1997, p. 69). This combines with a resurgent Australia seeing itself as more important globally than previously, with

a recovering SE Asian economy reducing uncertainty, and a closer US relationship fostered by the Howard coalition. This has been coined the 'Howard Doctrine' (McLean, 2003, p. 303). The second influence is the perception that a series of events in the South Pacific such as the Fiji coup in 2000, and the Solomon Islands crisis indicate an arc of instability where previously PNG was considered the only major risk. In addition, a security concern has evolved since '9/11' about weak states harbouring radicals, as incredible a notion as it seems in the South Pacific context (Senate Report, 2003, p. 175).

### **An example**

The decision in 2003 to provide 230 Australian police and 60 senior public servants directly to bolster PNG government resources, in addition to an extra \$800 million aid over five years, has brought the new policy sharply into focus. It has evoked considerable criticism about violation of PNG sovereignty. While approved by the PNG Government, at the threat of cutting existing aid programs worth \$350 million (20 per cent of PNG revenue), there has been significant protest, both in government and by the public (Aiken, 2004, p. 1). The aim is to protect the Australian aid investment, as previous direct funding of the PNG Government has produced little in terms of social or economic improvement. However, it is apparent this policy was developed with only limited consultation, and was essentially presented to PNG as a *fait accompli* (Somare, 2003, p. 1). As quoted below, the Australian Government intends to force change upon PNG's elected democratic government from below, demonstrating a condescending attitude to PNG democracy and sovereignty. In a contradictory way, it also demonstrates Australia is not in any position of colonial power, if it has to work from beneath to force change.

The new program will work with government at all levels, and with those parts of civil society that can influence the capacity and willingness of the Government to change (AUSAID, 2003, p. 3).

### **Unequal rights**

The threat of withdrawal of existing aid as a lever was used in the case of PNG. Twenty per cent of government revenue is Australian aid, given that the other 80 per cent of revenue is largely committed, it leaves little discretion for the PNG parliament, arguably the Australian aim. Economic control is the equivalent to military power in the colonial era; an element of sovereignty is ceded. In PNG, the 'redcoats' are coming as well in the form of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in an active policing role. The main criticism of this role has been that the AFP will apply PNG law without being subject to it themselves, understandable in many respects, but a clear example of unequal rights. A suggestion by PNG to parallel the AFP deployment by allowing PNG police to train 'on the job' in Australia was rejected out of hand, a clear double standard (Somare, 2003, p. 1).

### **Separation**

The committee found that the ignorance of otherwise globally aware Australians concerning Pacific affairs appears to stand in stark contrast to the relatively well-informed views of Australia amongst the Pacific population (Senate Report, 2003, p. xxix).

South Pacific nations criticise Australia for not seeing itself as part of the South Pacific. They note the low status given to Pacific relations by the government, examples being the reluctance of Australian Prime Ministers to attend the South Pacific Forum, and only one visit to PNG in the last eight years (Senate Report, 2003, p. 159). The issue of immigration and working permit rights is significant to South Pacific nations; they view special rights as part of Australia's obligation to

improve Island economies, as part of the Pacific community. The PNG Government requested seasonal labour mobility as part of the new aid package, for jobs such as fruit picking. This was rejected, despite labour shortages for such work in Australia. Australia wants to assist, but does not apparently want Papua New Guineans in Australia. One recent test of immigration was by Kiribati in relation to Australian policy if sea level change forced migration on hardship grounds. Australia confirmed it would not give special rights to Pacific migrants over others. This stands in contrast to New Zealand's positive discrimination for South Pacific migrants.

### **Deliberate exploitation**

It is harder to argue the case of current deliberate economic exploitation of South Pacific nations by Australia. This was the case during the colonial era in PNG with natural resources, both favouring Australian mining companies initially and then extracting royalties to Australia. One exploitative legacy has been the transfer of all environmental cleanup responsibilities to the PNG Government, absolving Australian companies, which especially in the case of Bougainville Copper and Ok Tedi, is a huge risk. There is little to exploit from the South Pacific based on current dire economic circumstances, although Australia favours increasing economic interdependency through a single currency. Much criticism of the proposed Pacific Area Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Agreement in destroying the little indigenous economic activity industry left in the Pacific in favour of Australia and New Zealand has occurred (Kelsey, 2004, p. 40). Australia has been uncompromising with Timor Leste over natural resource rights in the Timor Sea, and while this type of situation has not occurred in the South Pacific to date, it could in the future.

### **Conclusion**

There is a considerable body of opinion throughout the South Pacific about a condescending attitude by Australia to consultation when developing assistance strategies. It seems Australia, certainly in the case of PNG has created a 'no win' situation of 'take the package offered or risk all'. If this works in strengthening PNG, then in retrospect it may well turn out to be justified, otherwise it is a 'high handed' approach to a sovereign nation.

This paper has used three common criteria of colonialism as a test for current Australian policy constituting neo-colonialism in the South Pacific, noting this policy is significantly more interventionist than that applied before 2000. In PNG, both unequal rights and separation are quite apparent in the application of the policy. Deliberate exploitation for this example is not proved, although interdependence of the PNG economy with Australia is already high, due to the high proportion of aid in the PNG Government budget. It would be fair to claim, as many have, that this neo-colonial approach to foreign assistance by Australia constitutes a form of 'recolonisation'.

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