
Australia's current policy towards Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific: Is recolonisation underway?

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Introduction

'Australia, with New Zealand's help, is stepping up its colonial takeover of the South Pacific' proclaims the *Socialist Worker Monthly* headline of September 2003.¹ A '...colonial takeover of PNG's key operations' in conjunction with a '...colonial style intervention on the Solomon Islands' is of such concern that it is time for the 'workers...to overthrow the system'.² Such views are clearly held with conviction in certain quarters.

Perhaps the time has come to objectively test Australia's current policies towards Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the South Pacific, and determine whether a form of 'recolonisation' is underway. The aim of this paper is to assess such a claim. It will briefly define key terms and then review the Australian Government's policies towards PNG and the South Pacific, in particular Solomon Islands. Finally, it will test policies against a notion of contemporary 'recolonisation'.

Colonial forms

To understand 'recolonisation', it is important to appreciate related terms. From a theoretical perspective, there are four foundation terms in the 'societal control' lexicon; these being imperialism, colonisation, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Professor Fieldhouse of Cambridge University contends that '...these (words) may be seen as describing successive parts of an historical cycle: imperialism results in either colonisation or colonialism and each in turn may lead to neo-colonialism'.³ Imperialism, accordingly, is the overarching term. It is a term broadly used to describe one state's control over another, for wide-ranging motives.

Colonisation, the establishment of societies into quite sparsely populated regions, began in the late 15th century in America, Africa and Asia. Colonisation has had a '...favourable connotation... the settlers (normally) succeeded in transforming a non-European into a fundamentally European country and that, at least from the start, they did not regard their relations with their "mother country" as in any sense degrading or undesirable'.⁴ This is a highly subjective view. Nevertheless, while this paper will consider contemporary 'recolonisation', it is not considered in its literal sense; as resettlement of 'empty lands'.

In contrast, colonialism is widely considered a pejorative term due to clear evidence of its exploitative nature over the past few centuries. Its political space and freedoms are contextual, but, in general, '...colonies exist to serve the needs of the colonising power and as such occupy a subordinate and servile role'.⁵ Neo-colonialism is a similarly pejorative term. While the political space and domestic freedoms are overtly distinct from the 'metropolitan centre', there are political, economic and cultural legacies that beholden the former subservient to the former dominant state.

Neo-colonialism and the notion of 'recolonisation', I contend, have similar attributes but with differing motives. Neo-colonialism implies political, economic or cultural advantage over a former client state. 'Recolonisation' is more the recognition, by a former colonising or colonial power, that its

legacy has disadvantaged a former colony in the contemporary world. In other words, in a globalised, highly competitive world, former colonies have been 'left behind' and 'out of condition' to compete.

Australia's current policies

It is instructive to review Australia's policies towards PNG. In March 2001, when the Australian Government agreed to lend a further US\$30 million to the Government of PNG, a National Interest Statement (NIS)⁶ highlighted the '...historical, political, economic, strategic and social connections between the two countries'.⁷ It drew attention to Australia's moral responsibility as a former colonial power. Much of the NIS, however, was couched in neo-colonialist language. It reminded Committee members of Australia's trade and investment links with PNG⁸ and stated in bald terms '...the reality that an increasingly self-sufficient PNG would make less demand on Australia's overseas aid budget'.

If it is true that Australia's overseas aid budget is channelled into areas where it has made inadequate investment in the past, where it has left PNG 'out of condition', then its inadequacies are stark. Australia commits over \$300 million annually in aid. Yet one fifth of the population lives in poverty and PNG society is highly fragmented with over 700 disparate linguistic groups '...that test political and social unity.'¹⁰ The aid program seeks to improve leadership and governance in the constabulary and the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), with additional expensive initiatives now underway. Yet one informed writer contends that Australia's support to the PNGDF has created as many problems as it has solved.¹¹ Conversely, that same critic agrees that the delivery of essential services, maintaining essential infrastructure and minimising the impact of HIV/AIDS are core areas for Australian funded development that clearly '...reinforces the legitimacy of government.'¹²

Seen from one perspective, Australia's legacy to PNG demands 'recolonisation', seeking to make good certain inadequacies in Australia's earlier efforts. Historical perspective is important in these judgements. As Stewart Firth reminds us, '...colonial governments were skimpy, under-financed affairs... Most territories were run on a shoe-string, expected to pay for themselves and confined to creating a limited order.'¹³ Despite fiscal difficulties, life expectancy and adult literacy has dramatically improved in PNG, while infant mortality has declined.¹⁴ Compared to Angola and Sierra Leone,¹⁵ for example, PNG has achieved '...significantly better development outcomes.'¹⁶ So while forms of 'recolonisation' and neo-colonialism are evident in Australia's policies to PNG, this should not be exaggerated.

Similar competing views exist over Australia's policy to South Pacific Island countries, the most obvious case being Australia's leading role in Solomon Islands. The foundation monograph upon which the Australian Government ultimately acted sets out the dilemma. The paper asks the vital question: 'Is there a middle option between our present detachment and an attempt to reassert colonial rule?'¹⁷ In the end, an intervention plan was adopted with the consent of, and at the express request of, the Government of Solomon Islands. While there has been a limited intrusion on the sovereignty of Solomon Islands, the assistance is multinational in character, consensual and non-exploitative. Reviewing theoretical definitional criteria, it is neither an intervention with neo-colonialist baggage, nor is it a form of 'recolonisation'.

On balance, it does seem reasonable to suggest that a nuanced form of neo-colonialism (with its exploitative connotations) and 'recolonisation' (with its 'out of condition' connotations) is evident in Australia's current policy approach, more so with PNG than in the South Pacific. It is important to record, however, that the region is considerably more able, sustainable, autonomous and independent now than had Australia not provided assistance. Policies will often be viewed in highly politicised ways. In this regard, 'recolonisation' can legitimately be viewed as ethical policy couched in a pejorative form.

Conclusion

Former colonial powers seem destined to be criticised. As Foreign Minister Alexander Downer once stated: ‘Australia is frequently criticised in the Pacific for acting as a big brother and throwing its weight around in the region; on the other hand, when political disturbances do occur in the island countries, Australia is...criticised for not taking a more pro-active position.’¹⁸

This paper supports, in a somewhat tepid manner, the notion that Australia’s policies, particularly in PNG are, in part, a form of ‘recolonisation’. Such a conclusion is less evident with Australia’s policies in the South Pacific. While Australia rather unashamedly hones its policies towards its own national interest, this does not necessarily mean that the policies are mutually exclusive to the encouragement of sustainable institutions among our near neighbours. Indeed, Australia’s current policies are, arguably, the most morally legitimate and appropriate thing to do.

Endnotes

1. Tom Orsag, 'Pacific Forum Bullied into Submission' *Socialist Worker Monthly Review Website*, <http://archiveswmr.topcities.com/socialist_worker_monthly_review_september2003_page13.html#pacific>, accessed 14 May 2004.
2. 'No troops to Solomon Islands!' *Socialist World Website*, <<http://www.Socialistworld.net/eng/2003/07/26.html>>, accessed 14 May 2004.
3. D.K. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism 1870–1945*, MacMillan Press, London, 1983, p. 1.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
5. Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p. 79.
6. A National Interest Statement (NIS) is an Australian internal government process that involves a confidential briefing to members of the Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFDT) prior to a monetary loan being agreed.
7. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Second Australian Government Loan to Papua New Guinea*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, March 2001, p. 18.
8. PNG is Australia's 11th largest investment destination and 18th largest trading partner, as per the NIS.
9. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
10. AUSAID Eleventh Statement to Parliament on Australia's Development Cooperation Program, *Investing in Growth, Stability and Prosperity*, Commonwealth of Australia, September 2002, p. 42.
11. Otto Halupka, *From Imperialist Beginnings to Sandline: An Analysis of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force*, Master's Thesis, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, June 2002.
12. *ibid.*, p. 44.
13. Stewart Firth 'Colonial Administration and the Intervention of the Native' in D. Denoon (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 254–255.
14. AUSAID Eleventh Statement, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
15. Angola and Sierra Leone both gained independence around the same time as PNG and have similar resource endowments.
16. *ibid.*
17. ASPI Policy Report, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, June 2003.
18. Cited in James Cotton and John Ravenhill, *The National Interest in a Global Era: Australia in World Affairs 1996–2000*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 150.