

NAVIGATING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

INTRODUCTION

Navigating Our Future Together is an apt theme for this conference that bring together emerging Pacific leaders.

Peaceful though we are expected to be, idyllic though our islands and villages appear to be, there are many pressures on Pacific Islanders that those who aspire to leadership roles need to be aware of. Politics in the Pacific Islands can be as turbulent as the ocean that surrounds us.

To 'navigate' is to plan and chart our way ahead using known reference points, known tides, currents and weather patterns. We expect to use today's known reference points to decide how to move ahead and create the tomorrows our people want.

The use of the word 'navigation' is extremely important for emerging leaders to grasp and recall. It refers to our moving in such ways as to maximize opportunities, to get us from point A to B and other destinations efficiently. But it also refers to moving in such ways as to avoid hazards. This is very important in a region of reefs, shoals and narrow passages, of atolls and islands, strong currents, volcanoes, heavy seas and vicious storms.

And yet the metaphor of navigation points to one of our main conundrums in modern governance in our islands, in particular Solomon Islands where I am from.

We have, per head of population, so many hazards to deal with. The physical ones are easily recognized, provided for or dealt with. It is the human ones that are causing us the most concern. Leaders in small island states now have some extremely complex issues to deal with.

It is not a simple matter of tossing out the old sextant and using a modern navigation system. Governance in Solomon Islands has to take into account the crosscurrents in the social make-up of our communities, some of which are very resistant to progress.

My island, Guadalcanal, for example, is probably the richest in SI in terms of minerals, plantation agriculture and proximity to the national capital and international airport, but has some seemingly intractable difficulties. Leadership is fragmented, and there is no common reference point from which the people can work, so we are easily divided.

Without going into detail, I wish simply to point out that leadership of the kind that should be able to rapidly raise the quality of life of our people will find little support. Many of our people see no benefits in changing their lifestyle. They take what they want for their immediate daily needs from the modern economy, but revert quickly to the comfort zone of traditional living patterns. There is some wisdom in behaving this way because they see 'development' as threatening, in particular their land which their ancestors are buried in.

I come from the landowning tribe where the only gold mine is located, and it was very important to us to hold a special ceremony before mining operations were resumed. This ceremony was called and it was held in this year. Its purpose was to placate the spirits of the ancestors who are buried on our land.

Just a few weeks ago I took part in a ceremony of reconciliation between the mining company and the landowners. This was called the and it created a new platform on which the land user and the land owner interact to mutual benefits.

Every couple of years, a Chupu is held. This is a gathering of community leaders and chiefs, big men – if you will – at which all leaders make presentations of pigs and renew tribal acquaintances. For we have clans in our islands and the branches are scattered around the whole of the island.

Today's emerging leaders have to build up a reputation among their people to be recognized. Many are taking short cuts such as using government or donor aid funds to secure their standing and support. This, unfortunately, is not bringing us the kind of leaders who take good decisions. More often than not, they take decisions that are not principled or honourable but expedient – useful only for the situation at hand and usually inhibiting good governance in the long run.

Emerging leaders need to be aware of the pitfalls of taking expedient decisions for political reasons. The story of coups in the Pacific is the story of expedient decisions taken by leaders that eventually come back to haunt us.

So navigating our future today needs to work on the same basic principles which have secured the safety of seafarers on our oceans over hundreds of years. Good information, good understanding of the local socio-cultural environment, good principles and courageous decision-making.

When we ignore people's perceptions of how they should be served, when we balance the budget without providing benefits to people, when we lose touch with our roots, its time to go back to basics... to the village, and our traditional leaders.

Government is meant to begin in villages, just as leadership begins in families. The village community is made of many families and no doubt you can all trace your own roots to a village community. This then is our stepping stone to a successful, harmonious, and peaceful future.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF NAVIGATING THROUGH A DIVERSE CULTURE

In our country of some 450,000 people there are at least 60 languages and dialects used across the islands scattered throughout the archipelago, which number more than 900. Many languages have died away as we all struggle to understand and communicate with each other, and then with the social, political, and economical systems of the world.

Today many of our people interact in the world economy, buying and selling, and aspiring to adopt many of the trappings of western society. However many of our people live on the periphery of the global economy, and still retain many of their traditional ways of thinking and doing things. Since the economy of the Solomon Islands is so small, most of our citizens can not rely on the global economy to provide for their survival.

Many of them feel that they must keep one foot in the past to survive (which they do by traditional cultivation of food crops), and to retain their self esteem and sense of identity (without which they are nobody)

So, a “one size fits all” solution to peace, prosperity, and the growth of our nation, would seem impractical both on a country and regional footing given the ever changing levels of cultural and economic diversity which affect the way in which we exist as a people day to day. Indeed the navigational skills, knowledge, experience, and wisdom held by our traditional leaders will be required again and again to deal with many diverse issues, as we take each small step forward as a nation.

THE THREAT OF FURTHER CONFLICT

The Solomon Islands is in a post-conflict state, but today it also finds itself in a pre-conflict state. This is because many of the issues which were the genesis of the previous civil conflict remain un-addressed to this day. They have not gone away, and they have not been resolved as many people may be fooled in to thinking.

Despite the physical reminders of the recent violence and destruction of property in and around the Chinatown district, if you walk through Honiara today, you could be forgiven for thinking that the whole of the Solomons is at peace. But the tensions which caused the 2000 conflict are still there, in the background, simmering, and should they remain unresolved, they could well boil over again

LAND

The land tenure issue is the key root cause of social tension in Solomon Islands. It is an issue which successive governments have failed to address, and until it is addressed, it will continue to be the central issue which divides people, villages, and provinces. Concerns over land settlement and squatting on Customary and Alienated Land in Guadalcanal are as real today as when the ethnic conflict began.

There continues to be an increased incidence of unauthorized settlement and use of both customary and alienated land in and around Honiara. To the outsider, the land issue may appear to be a simple one to resolve – decide through the Commissioner of Lands who owns each particular title, and the issue is resolved. This, however, is not the case. Discovering who the traditional owners are of any area of land in the Solomon Islands means tracing back through the blood lines. It can be influenced by marriage, and depending on which province a land dispute relates to, it can be further complicated by patrilineal or matrilineal factors. This land tenure issue today, just as was the case in 1998, is potentially destabilizing, especially given that the Government has yet to establish the Commission of Enquiry into Guadalcanal land issues, as envisaged under the Townsville Peace Agreement.

LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

The land issue is a symptom of poor social and economic governance which was another significant root cause of the past conflict. Responsible and open government and a stable and secure environment are pre-conditions for a social and economic turn-around in Solomon Islands.

While the Government has benefited from attempts to support government governance from regional bodies and international donors, it is the Solomon Islands Government that must take ultimate responsibility for, and act to resolve, the problems that continue to destabilize the re-establishment of peace and security. Indeed had successive governments taken on the responsibility for providing more adequate representation in parliament of minority groups within the country i.e. the Asian community, and women, the issues which have simmered for many years, and then exploded in Chinatown in April this year, may have been avoided.

Transparency in our government, especially within the process of electing our Prime Minister, is something which the citizens of this country have every right to expect. Following the recent short lived election of Prime Minister Snyder Rini, there were allegations of vote buying among our parliamentary leaders, using money obtained from private Asian investors, namely of Chinese descent, and from the Republic of China (ROC) itself. These allegations have been vigorously denied by all members of the Asian community, especially those in and around Honiara. None the less what was perceived by many as the lingering stench of corruption in the election of Prime Minister Snyder Rini became the flash point for the recent violent riots in Honiara during April, this year. These protests/riots lead not only to the resignation of the Prime Minister after just – days in the post, but also resulted in the reprisal burning of many Chinese shops and businesses.

There is a critical need then for stronger Parliament democracy, to enhance Parliament/legislative oversight and to improve Parliamentary/constituency relations. This has to be achieved in an environment of significant change in Solomon Islands society.

Strong leadership is required. Positive change requires transformative leadership. Solomon Islands leaders need to acknowledge the importance of change to make our Parliament work better, and to work to improve government institutions. The new Prime Minister of the country, Manaseh Sogavare, has sought to make his mark very early in his term in office. His decision to appoint two parliamentary members to ministerial posts, both of whom are still being held in police custody on charges relating to the April riots in Honiara, was met with outrage by many in the community, and ultimately this failed. This was followed by the appointment of Dr. John Roughan, an outspoken critic of successive governments in this country, to the position of Secretary to the Prime Minister.

Both of these decisions attracted their fair share of critics and supporters alike, across all areas of the community.

Prime Minister Sogavare has also been quite vigorous in sharing his views on the future of the RAMSI mission in the Solomon Islands – even going so far as to suggest the formulation of an exit strategy for the mission. This, in his eyes, is an attempt to regain control of government processes, currently held by external consultants, and put the power and responsibility for decision making within our Public Service institutions back in the hands of the people of Solomon Islands.

Whether or not any of us living in the Solomons agree or disagree with some or even all of the decisions taken thus far by the countries' newest Prime Minister, what this does indicate is that this country is now under the control of a single minded and determined man who, at the very least, appears to be a strong leader. And strong leadership, in all areas of our government, is pre-requisite to taking the country beyond the current phase of temporary peace, and to successfully “Navigating Our Future Together”.

LEADERSHIP FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Whilst leadership at the government level is essential as an enabler to change in the broader Solomon Islands, the responsibility for leadership must begin down at the village level – from individuals & families, and on through our traditional and church leaders. For the majority of Solomon Islanders, our traditional leaders and religious institutions have formed the cornerstones of our societal development. During this time of the global information boom, for those not only in this country, but throughout other parts of the world where access to computers, the internet & email, and even basic phone systems are non-existent, traditionally based social interaction and leadership are key in maintaining social harmony, fostering individual and community growth, and managing societal change and conflict. It will be of no surprise for any of you to hear that, during the tensions from June

2000 to July 2002, the Solomon Islands was kept afloat, in tact, and viable by the most neglected group of leaders in the country, the traditional leaders. The traditional leaders are custodians of community land and resources, as well as tribal history and folklore, but also for guidance and social cohesion. Their job is not an easy one. They are worthy people in the eyes of their villagers and we need to recognize this, and them, both in terms of their authority to lead, and in providing any necessary resources and financial support to assist them in carrying out their roles. Our traditional leaders have been, and will be with us for a very long time, and they are truly the compass by which we must set our course to guide us through the difficult times which still lay ahead, in our quest to achieve lasting peace.

Now, we need to update and enhance the skills and capacity of these traditional leaders in conflict resolution, to conduct pro-active analysis of issues confronting them and their people, and ensure that the skills and information upon which their decisions are based, is kept up to speed with the changing conditions under which they now operate.

Where I come from leadership traditionally began in village communities. It used to be all about standing & charisma, demonstrations of wealth, and affirmations of continued kinship and cooperation. Many of these qualities retain their relevance today. But as the Solomons slowly makes its transition from being a group of many islands held under colonial control, to being an independent nation, our traditional leaders, and leadership structures face the increasing pressure of having to provide more than just their customary leadership. Now they are having to defend the ownership rights of the land & people they represent in the face of logging, mining, and fishing companies, many of whom see the Solomons as merely another opportunity to cash in on the rich bounty of our natural resources, whilst paying a pittance for their harvest, and at the same time operating outside

the parameters of environmental sustainability, and with apparent disregard for resource renewal or preservation.

THE ROLE OF RAMSI AND ITS FUTURE

Without the support of the RAMSI mission and all our donor partners, the people of the Solomon Islands would not be experiencing the freedom of movement and peace, and gradual re-building of the countries' structures and institutions, which they are today. That is an incontrovertible fact against which not even the most outspoken critic of RAMSI could argue with conviction.

But the RAMSI mission of 2006 operates under a clearly different atmosphere and circumstance than that which existed when it first arrived in the Solomons in July 2003. In a recent address to members of the Solomon Islands parliament, RAMSI Special Coordinator James Batley said *“RAMSI’s aim is to foster – in partnership with the people and government of Solomon Islands – a nation that is peaceful, well-governed, and prosperous”*.

Apart from continuing to maintain the rule of law and order, RAMSI is focusing on three areas as it moves toward its fourth year in Solomons.

1. **Institutional strengthening** across Govt. sectors such as finance & justice
2. **Capacity building** of individuals, but also of institutions as a whole
3. **Reviving the economy**, which has seen government revenue almost triple between 2002 to 2006

Like most in my country I am grateful for the presence of RAMSI, and the backing of the Australian government and its people. At the same time, like most in my country, we are always keen to observe that RAMSI is looking to the future, when they will begin to hand back more of the control of our institutions to our

government, and its people. And I believe that we are seeing that progress, and in turn the growth in confidence of our people in all areas of industry and society, and across all regions of our country.

A PARTNERSHIP WITH RAMSI

Speaking personally I am also reassured in the knowledge that RAMSI intend to be a part of the rebuilding of our nation, and that they see this as a “long term commitment”. But, unlike their colonial predecessor, RAMSI sees itself as a “partnership”, working in consultation with the government of the day, based on, as James Batley says “the principle of mutual obligation” and taking “responsibility” for its programs, priorities, and outcomes.

Linking this back to the idea of navigating the future together, it is clear that without a partnership where by there is a reliance between the person steering the ship, and the person navigating and negotiating the obstacles and hazards along the way.

This then is the key to why the RAMSI mission has, and I believe will continue to work well within the context of the Solomon Islands, because they see us as an equal partner in the re-building of our country. This is empowering, and it is a vital ingredient in helping to build the confidence of our people in themselves, their government, and their institutions. At the same time it also helps us to grow as a nation within the Pacific region itself, which in turn will lead us to greater opportunities to build our prosperity.

The greatest challenge, I believe, for the RAMSI of today and the future, is to take the people of Solomon Islands with them on this journey, as many in the country still identify RAMSI predominantly as a body which maintains law and order, and

coordinates military and policing functions. As leaders in the Solomon Islands, it is incumbent on all of us to help change the way our people view the goals, objectives, and mission of RAMSI from being not merely those of conflict prevention, but to becoming a partner, sharing in and strengthening many aspects of our nation well in to the future.

IN CONCLUSION

In concluding today, I would firstly like to thank you all for your attention, and to the organizers for inviting me to address this very important conference.

In summarizing what I believe are the keys to this issue of successfully “Navigating Our Future Together” they are:

- 1. Strengthening the role & capacity of our traditional leaders**
- 2. The resolution of the land ownership issues in Solomon Islands**
- 3. Strong leadership & good governance at all levels, from the village up**
- 4. Maintaining & strengthening our partnership with RAMSI**

I believe that it would be wrong for anyone to say that Solomon Islands is in a precarious position in terms of its future, its peace and prosperity. The Solomons, in partnership with RAMSI, is well placed to take advantage of the temporary peace it has enjoyed since the arrival of the mission in 2003. But, just like those competing in the World Cup, the key to achieving success, prosperity, and lasting peace for the country lays in how well, how decisively you grasp the opportunities which come your way. Through its leaders, and its people, and with the support of RAMSI and the donor community, I believe that Solomon Islands can become a prosperous, peaceful, and unified nation. Indeed I believe that the Solomons can become a leader in the Pacific region, but only if we can work together to fully grasp the opportunity for peace upon which, for now, we hold a tenuous grip. In the words of one famous mariner “thus far we run before the wind”.