

AUSTRALIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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Historical Connection

Australia has had a long history of association with the countries of the South Pacific, the major reason having been the geographical proximity in which Australia found itself to these countries. Over the last century and a half, Australia's contacts with the various island countries of the Pacific area have been in a wide and occasionally dubious number of areas. Missionary activity formed an early link, beginning in some islands, e.g. the Solomons, as early as the 1840's. In PNG, Australian missionaries were particularly active in the last three decades of last century.

A more dubious area of contact was the practice of "blackbirding" whereby Islanders were recruited, e.g. from the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands, sometimes by deception and sometimes virtually by force, to work on the sugar plantations of Queensland and Fiji. The establishment last century of sugar plantations in the islands, particularly in Fiji, was another area of contact. Another very early contact was through whaling. Australian whalers were visiting the islands as far back as the 1820's.

Australia has also had a long history of trading with the islands — going back, as with whaling, to the 1820's. The trading relationship has recently been coordinated through SPARTECA — the South Pacific Australia-New Zealand Regional Trade Agreement, whereby South Pacific countries will have non-reciprocal free access rights to the Australian and New Zealand markets.

Strategically the area is important for Australia. One only has to

recall the fighting during the war in the Pacific to understand that.

In more recent times, Australia had a role in the constitutional development of Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

Today, rapid constitutional and economic changes are taking place in the South Pacific area. The former metropolitan (i.e. colonial) powers are for the most part gracefully withdrawing from the region, or have already done so, and in the wake of this, a number of newly-independent states — now numbering nine — have emerged.

This process of the decolonization has generally been orderly, this being due in large measure to the cooperation and responsibility of the former administering powers and the mature approach of the people of the countries involved.

Self-Determination

In the post-war period Australian policy has been to support self-determination in the territories of the South Pacific. I turn first to PNG.

The historical basis of Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea is such that in some ways even today, Australia has what could be termed a "close and special relationship" with Papua New Guinea. As with all the island nations, Papua New Guinea had an almost century-long history of colonization. In 1884, Germany took possession of the northern half of the island, and in the same year Britain, at the urging of the Australian colonies, declared a protectorate over the southern part which was transferred to Australia in 1906 as the Territory of Papua. Between 1914 and 1921, former German New Guinea was under Australian military control. A civil administration was established under the mandate of the League of Nations in 1920, and continued until the Pacific War reached New Guinea in 1942. Between 1942 and 1949, the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit administered the country, and in 1949, the north-eastern part of the island was placed under the United Nations Trusteeship system with Australia as the Administering Power. This area and Papua gradually came to be administered as one unit. This situation continued until September 1975. I mention this history to draw attention to the depth of the Australian association with Papua

New Guinea. When Papua New Guinea became independent in 1975 it marked not only the achievement of what all independently-minded people seek; it marked also the successful completion of the Australian Government's policy towards Papua New Guinea.

Australia has welcomed and to some extent assisted in the coming to independence of other island nations, particularly Nauru, which became independent in 1968, having been administered by Australia, as a UN Trust Territory, on behalf of Australia, Britain and New Zealand, from 1947. In Vanuatu, the former New Hebrides, Australian servicemen on loan to Papua New Guinea took part as non-combatants in action to restore order to rebellious Santo Island and RAAF transports also assisted.

New Caledonia and French Polynesia have not yet attained independence and remain French territories. The French Government has stated that self-government for the people of the colonies will be granted if the people of the colonies call for it. Australia welcomes this statement as it believes in the right of self-determination for the islanders, as for other peoples of the world. The ultimate constitutional status of Pitcairn – and some other very small territories – has yet to be worked out.

Regional Activities

A most significant feature of the emergence of independent South Pacific countries is the increasing movement towards regionalism. A large element in this move is the fact that, apart from Papua New Guinea, the island nations are mostly small and have limited resources. They therefore need, more than do most countries, to take a regional approach to many of the problems they face, such as communications over the great distances between them and the countries of the Pacific Rim, education, access to markets and so on.

The beginnings of regionalism can be seen in the establishment in 1947 of the South Pacific Commission and the South Pacific Conference, the formation of which was strongly supported by Australia. The Commission was in fact the product of the Canberra Agreement of 1947, and

was the first effort at looking at South Pacific problems from a regional point of view. (Australia pays just over one-third of its annual budget.) The Commission initially drew its strength from the so-called metropolitan powers (Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United States) and had as its aim the sponsoring of social and economic development in the Pacific region. However, the emerging consciousness of the people of the area led to a desire on their part to see the formation of a body more representative of and more receptive to their needs. In particular they sought an opportunity to discuss political problems. Australia (and New Zealand), as countries of the region, recognized this need and supported the establishment of what has become the South Pacific Forum. The South Pacific Forum held its first meeting in New Zealand in 1971. Members were to be drawn from the independent countries of the South Pacific – and a measure of the rapid pace at which South Pacific nations became independent during the 1970's, is the fact that the membership has doubled in ten years.

In the early stages, the Island Forum countries tended to caucus before the full meetings, including Australia and New Zealand, took place. The habit of holding such meetings beforehand has been dropped, a welcome indication, as far as we are concerned, that Australia, in particular, is accepted as just one more of the members. Australia is of course larger and more richly-endowed with natural resources than the island countries. But it wishes to continue to build close cooperative relations with these countries as a member of the region and on a basis of partnership.

Australia therefore supports activities sponsored by the Forum. These include the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC), the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Pacific Forum Line. The Forum Fisheries Agency was in fact established in 1979 as the result of an initiative proposed by the Australian Prime Minister at a Forum meeting the year before. Australia provided \$100,000 as an establishment grant and agreed to meet one-third of the annual budget of the Fisheries Agency. In that same year, Australia also provided more than one million dollars

towards the cost of the Pacific Forum Line. Australia also provides one-third of the annual budget of SPEC.

Aid

A comprehensive Australian aid program in respect of the South Pacific has grown out of what was a series of ad hoc bilateral arrangements.

Just over half of Australia's bilateral aid (1981 total A\$445M.) goes to Papua New Guinea, under an agreement concluded between Australia and PNG in March 1976. The agreement provided for a minimum annual budget support grant payment of \$180 million in each of the five years to this year (1981) with a gradual reduction (of 5% each year in real terms) between 1981/82 – 1985/86. These arrangements are subject to review; they are supplemented annually by payments of a size consistent with Australia's intention to take account of inflation and other factors, and also, in the longer term, to lessen Papua New Guinea's dependence on Australian aid. Total assistance in the five years is \$1060M.

Australian assistance to Papua New Guinea also includes provision of training and education for Papua New Guineans and the services of Australian experts for short-term assignments as required by PNG projects.

The second major group of recipients of Australian aid are the ASEAN countries. Over \$57 million dollars will go to these countries this year.

Apart from Papua New Guinea and the ASEAN countries, the other priority area for Australian aid is the South Pacific, excluding Papua New Guinea. There will be a 40% increase in aid to the South Pacific (to \$120 million) in the current three year period 1980/81 – 1982/83. The bulk of it has been earmarked for bilateral project aid to nine countries in the region: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. Of these countries, Fiji is the principal recipient.

In providing aid to the countries of the South Pacific, Australia is aware of difficulties which may arise in absorbing it, and aid is therefore

also given in the form of budget support, for example by funding the local costs of projects, and as grants to strengthen development banks and related institutions. SPARTECA – the South Pacific Australia-New Zealand Regional Trade and Economic Agreement – will also, it is hoped, help the countries of the South Pacific to become less dependent upon aid. Under SPARTECA, South Pacific countries will receive non-reciprocal free access to Australian and New Zealand markets for their products.

It has been of concern to Australia to broaden and develop its relations with the countries of the Pacific region past the purely trade/development assistance stage. In recent years, Australian Government subsidies for the preservation of the native cultures of the Islands have been substantial. Australia contributes to the Fund for Preservation and Development of South Pacific Cultures, and to funding for the South Pacific Festival of Arts (A\$200,000 in 1980).

Australia has also sought to strengthen its ties with the countries of the region through a strengthening of diplomatic representation, and now has representation in Western Samoa, the Solomon Islands, PNG, Nauru, New Caledonia, Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu. There was only one post – in Fiji – ten years ago.

Conclusion

Geography and history have thrown Australia and the countries of the South Pacific together. We have a lot to learn from each other. I hope from what I have said today that I have been able to convey to you to some extent the importance with which Australia regards its South Pacific relationships, and the high priority it accords to the prosperity, progress and stability of the area. It is as important for us as it is for them.