

Determining PNG's own Future

Maybe governments and politicians, or other leaders, have never enjoyed great public esteem, the world over. Sometimes feared, widely disdained or ridiculed, some leaders have enjoyed honeymoons of popularity, but relatively few have enjoyed lasting popularity, verging on reverence, like Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi.

The level of scepticism is particularly high at this movement, worldwide, with politicians widely competing with investment bankers as the least popular or trusted members of the community. A recent popular survey in Australia had artists (like Blanchett), public-spirited businessmen (like Dick Smith), charity leaders, scientists and a few other public office holders standing head and shoulders ahead of politicians, less salubrious financiers and other businessmen in the stakes of trustworthiness. (Some politicians, including, interestingly, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard come ahead amongst politicians). Government credibility in countries like Greece (where democracy started) is rock bottom, but disclosures of extensive (largely) petty abuse of MPs' allowances even in the UK (where Parliamentary democracy developed) has dragged down public respect for elected representatives, who are entrusted to oversee use of public funds,

In PNG there may be strong allegiance to local clan leaders, providing local benefits, but there is wide scepticism or hostility to government, including both politicians and public servants, simply because it has ceased to perform in their district. Nevertheless, the community is ready to give credit where it's due, to individual leaders and officials making a difference, particularly at local level. There is largely a higher trust of local churches, NGOs and other community organisations, and some businesses and businessmen who provide a reliable service, than Government leaders and officials, who are generally considered absent (even constantly overseas), unreliable or only appear around election time.

It is hardly surprising that there is such a public outcry against Maladina's Amendments to weaken the power's of the Ombudsman Commission, one of the relatively well-regarded public institutions protecting wider community interests. Whilst the politicians may see themselves holding a mandate to make policy and legislative decisions, the public (especially the informed population) see this Amendment as crudely protecting their own patch, requiring a more neutral body to determine whether politicians should be exempted from various Leadership Code provisions, rather than politicians themselves! This Code was introduced following wide public consultation by the Constitutional Review Commission; it should not be overturned surreptitiously as a Private Members Bill, following Parliamentary Committee hearings whose results were never revealed.

Now is certainly not the right time to remove valuable checks and balances on Executive decisions, and potential abuses of power, considering the prevailing high level of abuse of public funds, highlighted by the Finance Inquiry, Public Accounts Committee and rapid and largely unexplained drawdown of Trust funds accumulated from recent Windfall Revenue, with various reports also suggesting drawdowns occurring, but limited or no implementation on the ground. Likewise, retaining the full capacity of the Leadership Code to intervene

promptly to protect public offices from abuse by leaders, independently of any criminal process, and without meeting such evidential criteria, is critical. We must restore and reinforce public respect for the State and PNG public institutions, through restoring performance and accountability directly to the population of this land, through to the local level. Political leaders are also public servants, who must be responsive and accountable, and not consider that winning an election (by whatever means) grants them an un-restrained five year mandate.

Consensus building through the planning process, notably the Vision 2050, Strategic Development Plan (2010-2030) and MTDS, can be valuable, but requires genuine consultation. The DSP, however, falls far short, having entailed little or no public consultation, and, whilst providing a useful collation of information and ideas, is a somewhat underwhelming document, providing optimistic projections, with little analysis for achievement or consensus on proposed directions or mechanisms, like the effectiveness or even desirability of 'development corridors'. Its emphasis on Human resource development and agriculture is sound, but focus on large scale development using alienated and converted land, which it deems highly fertile, is controversial and ill informed. If DSP now contributes to genuine public debate on policy options, however, it provides a valuable role.

Another key area where policymakers must heed the public relates to natural resource development and extraction. In recent weeks various disputes have come to the fore related to mining developments, usefully still contained within legal processes, as with the issue of reef dynamiting and tailings at Basamuk. Likewise, there's extensive landowner concern over extensive Special Purpose Leases being granted over customary land, without landowners' informed consent, often to unknown groups and unknown purposes.

The country should reach a consensus on natural resource development. PNG is rich in a variety of natural resources, minerals gas, forest, marine and locally agricultural resources. Its agricultural resources are locally rich, but widely subject to real constraints and pressures, like seasonal flooding or drought, shallow tropical soil, easily leached, and dependent upon rainforest cover to maintain fertility, plus growing population pressures. Its land and marine resources are not limited resources and must be nurtured and managed carefully at the national and local level for the country's and local community's needs, not taken for granted.

Our non-renewable resources, like oil/gas, copper, gold and nickel are also finite, even if large quantities prevail in different parts of PNG. They provide invaluable for providing government's revenue, to enable it to perform its infrastructure and service functions, albeit tasks performed poorly, with funds diverted from core functions (like road maintenance, rural services and associated staff training etc) to administration in national and provincial centres, white elephant projects, overseas travel and corrupt leakage.

Mineral developments have mixed impacts. They can provide national and local revenue, so long as undue concessions aren't granted. They provide employment (largely temporary, as with LNG construction), again assuming that undue concessions aren't made for use of foreign workers. They tend to provide improved services to local communities in the vicinity

of the mine site, often unavailable hitherto. Against that, mines (less so, LNG) create a massive local impact in term of surface damage and disruption, particularly deep or shallow open cast operations and potentially from waste disposal, as well as some negative social and health impacts, including from displacement from land and traditional livelihoods. Mineral extraction can certainly meet high international standards or be undertaken to low (largely developing country/former Soviet block) standards, but in each case there'll be an impact. For PNG, with its largely rural population, dependent upon sustainable natural resources, negative impacts are more direct than in urbanised economies, and it is even more critical that mines here operate at a higher standard, than for example low rainfall and ecologically less sensitive locations, like parts of Australia. Mines also impose large opportunity costs, for example undermining sustainable industries, such as agriculture or prospective tourism (as highlighted by the conflict over the Kokoda Track), as well as jeopardising biodiversity and prospective payments for environmental services (in pristine locations like Crater Mountain). Environmental and social impact studies should be serious management and screening exercises, not marginal, taken for granted or ignored.

In terms of social and economic impacts, the inevitable Dutch Disease (which can be mitigated but not eliminated) causes impacts upon the rest of the economy from major resource developments. LNG is likely to jeopardise domestic agriculture, tourism, manufacturing and employment prospects, unless great care is taken, but it may also undermine mining prospects. Absorbing one LNG project will be a major task, more than one daunting.

It's tempting for leaders to and resource Departments to rush for all major projects available, but the resource remains, whether extracted now or later. It's much wiser to recognise the implications and be selective on which developments should proceed, sooner, later or not at all, avoiding counter-productive short cuts and undertaking full landowner briefings and consultations, not with selected clans but all landowning groups. Some resources are better kept in the ground for a later day, when other resources are exhausted or when information and technical capacity to manage the project properly are available, whilst further projects may be deemed too marginal in relation to returns and revenue, or the social or environmental impacts are simply too great. In many countries large areas, such as National Parks/protected areas or high biodiversity, fragile or populated areas, are off limits to mining, for example.

Of course foregoing projects for wider public or long term interest is problematic for some. The State must perform its role of redistributing the benefits from existing major projects. Unfortunately PNG has a very narrow tax base, and mines/oil and future LNG play a key part in funding roads, police, education and health services for the rest of the country, not just the project vicinity. Opening up opportunities for communities to access other, sustainable economic opportunities and services, largely provided by the private sector, also requires government participation, whether in funding LLGs, restoring/maintaining roads and airstrips, or providing a suitable investment environment for local, as well as international businesses, including encouraging competition and further investment in telecommunications, and, for example, PPP/partnerships with training and service provision.

Restoring trust in public institutions and leadership, developing and implementing public policies and establishing a national consensus go hand in hand. Steamrolling policies, projects and deals and removing checks and balances, undermines public confidence and involvement, and undermines national development prospects.