

Public Commitment to Safeguarding and Strengthening Democratic Institutions and Processes and the Need for Reliable Data for Sound Planning and Outcomes

Two professions suffering bad press worldwide in recent times have been politicians and investment bankers. The former for their short-sightedness, vanity and manipulation of State resources for private gain, whilst the latter for their excesses, including grand bonuses, even whilst bringing the global financial system crashing, and destroying businesses and jobs. In PNG you'd have to add loggers, the archetypal villains, and corrupt and non-performing public servants to the list. The reality is, however, that whilst some groups may wield undue power and influence, they still operate within society's conditions, in terms of rules or their application. Society cannot simply put on innocent expressions and cast the exclusive blame on specific groups, however apparently malignant, as everyone (individually and collectively) has some responsibility for how society functions, both in setting the rules and applying (or ignoring) them. Few complain and many readily join in when things are apparently going well, even blatant rip-offs like UVistract or political or resource sell-outs, however dubious or at the expense of others or the future!

Politicians almost worldwide are seen as self-seeking and treating the interests of the population they purportedly serve as marginal. Exposés and inquiries from developed democratic countries like Italy, UK and US with its army of lobbyists, and developing countries from South Africa to PNG highlight abuses ranging from minor sleaze to serious misconduct. Leaders in non-democratic countries, however, from West Africa to Central and East Asia and now Fiji are invariably even less accountable, also committing open human rights abuses against their own people.

Wartime leader Winston Churchill stated ironically that democracy is a very poor system of government but better than any other. Each democratic system has its weaknesses and costs (including associated with elections), but unlike ruthless juntas, as in Burma (Myanmar), offers hope and the opportunity for periodic removal from office. There are also shining models of inspiring leaders, like Obama, or selfless national and local leaders, like Mandela, who subjugate their own interests to that of the community they serve.

It's sometimes said that PNG would merit from some benign dictatorship, instilling greater discipline and foregoing the relative chaos of PNG's multiple layers of government; this view is, however, misguided. Over history there have been few benevolent dictators, and if they commence with positive ideals they invariably slip into self-serving ways in the absence of effective systems of accountability. Even long-serving leaders, or those lacking an effective Opposition, become complacent and, as the saying goes, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely! Effective democracy and accountable government, however requires commitment, ownership and constant effort throughout the community. PNG requires more collective effort to make its institutions accountable, not leaving the task to others. They say, perhaps unfairly, you get the politicians and administration you deserve.

Last week's drama in Parliament was a replay of events from the 1980s and 90s. Frivolous and incessant votes of no-confidence undermine effective government and the operation of the legislature. On the other hand, votes of no confidence are a legitimate Constitutional method for

keeping the executive Government accountable to the legislature. Last week's backbench revolt provided a wake-up call to the ruling team, which reacted by securing Parliament's adjournment until November. Backbench MPs feel ignored, with Parliament widely seen as subordinated to the Government and unable to perform its Constitutional oversight role, with the Speaker strongly criticised for inadequate impartiality. I won't deal with the legality or otherwise of the adjournment, but such a long recess would clearly prevent Parliament performing its critical functions, including tabling and debating legislation and amendments (e.g. on ICT), reports from Inquiries and public bodies, and responding to questions on issues of public concern. Excessive recesses raise public scepticism (over motivation and justification for MPs' salaries and allowances) and undermine the democratic process, and if the Constitution is breached, and Constitutional rights revoked, who's to say it might not slide towards the autocratic rule now prevalent in Fiji, which a few Melanesian leaders seem to tolerate readily.

Whilst more resilient than in some developing countries, PNG's democratic institutions, at all levels, have performed unsatisfactorily. Despite some commendable institutions, the State's core functions of service delivery and rule of law have functioned poorly, whilst the Electoral process, whilst better managed and more peaceful in 2007, denied a large portion of the population their right to vote and allowed some Members to gain seats through money and manipulation. Nevertheless, PNG has the basis of workable democracy and must ensure that it resists efforts to undermine that and works to making its institutions function effectively. That requires greater emphasis on broad-based education, public awareness, legal and financial literacy, to enable greater public accountability. Parliamentary functions need strengthening, not undermining. The Speaker must be neutral and Parliamentary Committees made to work, securing answers from the Executive, including Public Service. Public Funds, including for Districts under the DSIP, must not be considered Members' Funds, or released by the Executive to MPs as rewards for political advantage. These are funds for core services (requiring standardised processes), and their release to districts (or restraint) for political expediency, notably retaining Government in office, is clearly an abuse of power.

For Government to perform its functions effectively requires accurate and timely information. Government expenditure and operations should largely be routine, based upon delivering services through functioning systems in accordance with quantifiable needs, overseen by regular inspections, audits and penalties for abuse, rather than run like a lottery. There should be little or no discretionary powers granted to Ministers or other officials, nor should they have major personal vested/business interests in their portfolio, including being a major beneficiaries of cattle under NADP, or a Forest Minister operating his own logging operations¹.

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The Command Economies (e.g. former Soviet Union) tried to plan and control all resources centrally. Like USSR, China hitherto provided grand 10 year plans, including comprehensive production targets, which lacked credibility, resulting in totally bogus reported outcomes, as no-

¹ The massive proposed Bewani forest conversion to oil palm, rice and paper pulping (being misnamed "agro-forestry"), incidentally, requires rigorous and impartial vetting, as it (and other similar proposals) could prove disastrous for local communities, with extensive forest clearance and potentially no tangible subsequent agricultural development, or no real community control, as prevalent in Indonesia.

one dared fail to meet their targets, however unrealistic. These control economies clearly failed, as they lacked both adequate knowledge to forecast and plan realistically, and lacked market incentives stimulating large and small scale entrepreneurs. China's recent economic spurt resulted from unleashing that entrepreneurial spirit thought the market, whilst maintaining order and adequate investment in needed core infrastructure and other services. The downsides of growing inequity, particularly between urban and rural areas, and major environmental externalities are challenges China must address.

Whilst the PNG Government should not, therefore, try to undertake unduly comprehensive forecasting and planning, it does, however, require accurate current data (usable by the public and private sectors) and reasonable estimates on future demand, to ensure provision of public goods for which it is responsible (including through alternative mechanisms like PPPs). As with any business, government (national, sub-national and SOEs) requires an accurate inventory of assets, including roads, bridges, ports, airstrips and their condition, hospitals, health centres, aid posts, schools, police stations, institutional and public houses etc.. These inventories should be publicly available. Accurate data is required on population and trends, health status, morbidity and mortality, formal and informal employment, education and training output and standards, production and trade statistics etc.

Accurate statistics are crucial to sound planning and service delivery (i.e. Government's reason for existing). PNG's statistics have long been neglected. Politicians like spending money on visible projects and consumption, including unproductive executive aircraft. Maintenance of core infrastructure is severely under-resourced. Statistical collection and analysis is invariably the first victim of Budget cuts. Statistics seem boring and irrelevant to politicians; costly to collect and with little immediate outcome. In PNG statistics are also utilised inadequately, with limited knowledge also on how to use them.

The Bank of PNG provides invaluable economic and some social data, including export statistics from commodity boards. There is useful agricultural data from various sources amassed in a forthcoming Agriculture volume by Bourke et al, (though partly from aging surveys). NEFC has analysed actual service delivery costs and tracked use of provincial functional grants, and the discrepancy with needs; crucial data which has contributed to recent sub-national financing reforms. However, the nation's National Statistical Office (NSO), mandated to provide extensive data (formerly in a timely manner), and other entities (like DAL statistics) have been long neglected. The 2006 Demographic Health Survey (DHS) is long overdue, the 2008 Household Income and Expenditure Survey has finally commenced, whilst the critical 2010 National Census is apparently delayed to 2011 (with results in 2012 or beyond). Official trade, GDP, employment, educational and other critical statistics are years obsolete or merely estimates, as are most public inventories.

The country is now spending large sums on plans, notably the National Strategic Plan, Long Term Development Plan, revised MTDS and various sectoral plans. The NSP team is undertaking valuable work and consultations, but there remain duplicative planning exercises, with inadequate substantive data upon which to base these plans and strategies. PNG will not achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals, to which it is committed, and won't even know how far short it will fall or what is required to restore, maintain and upgrade facilities, train

staff, supply medicines etc. Some proposed comprehensive surveys are excessive and never fully analysed or utilised, but expenditure on collecting targeted data routinely is critical to planning and enabling focused public expenditure and minimising waste.

PNG's Budget process is now more transparent (with notable exceptions), but, despite greater commitments to MTDS priorities, allocations (and foregone revenue) have remained poorly targeted and outcomes unsatisfactory, with excessive expenditure on administration, certain National Departments and provinces, duplicative public institutions, personal emoluments, white elephant projects and consumption, overseas travel, corruption and waste etc, at the expense of priority maintenance and core services. Accurate and accessible social and economic data and inventories and realistic planning will help focus allocations and expenditure and slash waste, if combined with revitalised oversight institutions (including Parliament) and enhanced public awareness of laws and rights, including greater focus in schools on asking questions rather than simply learning facts. Those leaders, old or younger, who think they own, rather than serve, the institutions of State and wider public, handicap PNG's progress. The capacity to seriously challenge governments through No-Confidence motions or subject political (or other) leaders to the Leadership Code (reinforced and not watered down) remain essential components of democracy and keeping the Executive on its toes and accountable to Parliament and the public.