

It all starts with Good Governance

In the past few weeks we've been fortunate to have been addressed by a number of internationally renowned visitors and respected local professionals on themes related to governance and development. We've gained insights from seminars with philosopher and political economist Francis Fukuyama, and scholar and award winning investigative journalist, Gary Swanson, as well as impressive presentations on good leadership from our own John Togouata of the Ombudsman Commission and several others.

Various consistent messages prevailed in these meetings, including that, although positive growth may be achieved from resource extraction with good commodity prices, lasting broad-based development first requires good governance. I.e., one might experience improved growth rates, some becoming rich, but it's unlikely to be sustainable and benefits will be limited. Whilst democracy alone won't necessarily bring broad-based social and economic development, sound, answerable government and transparent and honest democratic processes provide critical pillars for development. It was agreed that with its diverse social groups only an effective and inclusive democracy, encompassing all interests, would be satisfactory for a strong and unified PNG.

It was recognised that, whilst there are strong forces promoting good governance and democratic institutions, there are counter forces, including powerful vested interests, which benefit from distorting electoral processes, corrupting public institutions in their interests, whether mafia in Italy, triads in China, drug cartels in Columbia, ruling juntas or local warlords, or other business and establishment interests.

Whilst PNG has a worthy Constitution, it takes more than a document and sound laws to enable balanced and socially just development. Development does not fall from trees, as handouts. It takes hard work to make institutions work, with critical roles for politicians, journalists, officials, watchdogs, courts, and the wider public and private sector to ensure public accountability and public policy discussion.

The importance of good journalism is critical. Journalism is about getting accurate news to the people, even in remote areas. Gary Swanson emphasised there is good but also much bad journalism. Good journalists do not make a fortune, but good journalism entails balanced coverage, and allowing ordinary people's voices to be heard, not just those of government and corporations. That entails probing and demanding answers from leaders and commercial interests, not just accepting and publishing press statements. Although big business has acquired much global media, giving rise to potential conflicts of interest, good journalism requires balance and that investigations and articles are not biased towards owners' interests. It was argued, for example, that Fox media in the US fails to meet required standards of balanced journalism and that logging company ownership of a newspaper in PNG jeopardises good journalism, when covering areas of commercial interest.

John Togouata provided a clear definition of corruption and impressive presentation on the characteristics and standards voters should demand of candidates in the 2007

Elections. He emphasised that arguments by leaders that PNG is different, when defending poor standards in public office, were just lame excuses. He said that whilst there are serious problems in PNG, with poor accountability by leaders and officials, and inadequate resources for watchdogs, there are some positive trends, including increasing public awareness and demands for accountability, and growing cooperation between investigating agencies.

Considerable attention has been drawn over recent weeks to what has gone wrong in PNG, and how to address governance ills, seriously undermining its development prospects. Concerns are that: -

- PNG's institutions are being undermined and losing integrity;
- major vested interests may be influencing politics, exacerbated by pressure for campaign funding;
- government is hostile to public discussion on issues of public interest (as demonstrated by the Forest Minister's efforts to prevent forestry dialogue);
- despite positive political reforms, the electoral process remains subject to serious manipulation,
- Parliament has become unduly a rubber stamp, rather than debating issues and Bills in committees.
- Bills providing exclusive powers of appointment and revocation to NCDC's Chairman, organic law changes enabling District Authorities and removing council presidents from Provincial Governments, and changing rules of evidence making it harder for the Ombudsman Commission to protect public offices from abuse, have been pushed through at short notice (often as Private Members Bills), undermining transparent democratic process;
- Some leaders have become hostile of late to oversight by Parliament (with inadequate PAC funding), watchdogs, journalists or the public, but oversight is clearly needed. Ministers, MPs and public officials are all public servants. The trend for MPs to withdraw from core functions of public debate and government oversight (as envisaged in the Constitution) towards managing public money at provincial and district levels is retrograde and wrong, breaching critical divisions of functions.

Participants emphasised that achieving real democracy and broad-based development, and countering growing and destructive levels of corruption in public institutions, including leaders, junior officials and telephone linesmen, requires great commitment from the entire community. It entails major cooperative effort from honest leaders and officials, but also the private sector and whole community. This effort is long term and there will be frustrations, requiring constant vigilance and willingness to stand up and be heard. No-one can leave the task simply to others, and say it's not their responsibility. As the saying goes evil thrives where the good stand aside, so everyone has a responsibility to counter corruption and abuse including vote rigging, multiple voting, fund misuse or improper licensing. Whether a journalist, politician, policeman, junior clerk or ordinary citizen, all share some guilt if aware of wrongdoing and doing nothing.

Good institutions don't stand up by themselves, but require active attention. There is wide public frustration and feeling of powerlessness, but it was noted that Queensland was once highly corrupt, but turned itself around as journalists probed, inquiries occurred, people protested and government was reformed and standards raised. Some have responded this is impossible in PNG, as wantokism and obligations are too strong. But PNG has demonstrated its capacity for change and rejection of corruption – as demonstrated after Inquiries and public outcries over forestry in the 1980s, and over superannuation funds recently, both leading to major reforms. Those tasks remain incomplete, with tardy follow up to inquiry recommendations, limited prosecutions and reluctance to address non-compliance in forestry (highlighted by recent independent reviews). The attempts by the Forestry Ministry and some industry consultants, to deny breaches and discredit government-commissioned reviews as undertaken by partisan, anti-logging and known “greenies” teams, were misguided. The reviews were professional and the team members had wide backgrounds.

The recent effort by a few to thwart dialogue on forestry, demonstrated extraordinary paranoia, unacceptable in a country cherishing democracy and freedom of expression. Here was an exercise, requested by government, designed to provide open discussion on forest opportunities, policy and application, widely, though not universally welcomed by stakeholders as providing a constructive way forward, finding areas of consensus and cooperation. Three well-researched, constructive and certainly unthreatening background papers were prepared, although the workshop would address governance, resource planning issues, inadequate inventories, operations and unsustainability, variations of export prices and world market prices, and carbon trading opportunities. The workshop was exploring ways for PNG and resource owners to better benefit from their forestry resources. It seems odd that individuals in Government would be averse to such discussion, if understandable that some industry participants prefer non-exposure of their operations!