

Keeping Focussed upon Priorities, despite Distractions and the Future Outlook

It's two years until the next National Elections, but the political aspirants are already planning their moves. In the meantime the long-forecast Supreme Court ruling, which has deemed aspects of the Organic Law on Integrity of Political Parties (OLIPPAC) unconstitutional, has set the cat amongst the pigeons, perhaps strengthening Parliamentary control over executive government, whilst enabling MPs to resume their pastime of orchestrating votes of no-confidence in the prevailing leadership.

The Opposition lists a string of failures and abuses by the incumbent leadership, which retorts that it has provided the country eight years of stability and economic growth. The vote of no-confidence process in the past has largely had little relationship with 'confidence' or otherwise, and more to do with opportunism. Parliament has a fundamental role in providing checks on the executive government, and, where necessary, removing one that is deficient. No-one wants a return to multiple, almost frivolous, non-confidence votes, where government and MPs' attention is focused constantly on survival and the numbers game, and never on core functions. On the other hand, it should be recognised that the private sector and even public service can function despite political instability, so long as appropriate policies remain relatively constant and sound annual appropriations approved and implemented. A major problem PNG has been facing over recent years has not been political instability, but policy inconsistency and particularly the failure of government to perform core functions, partly from being sidetracked and partly being unwilling or unable to put its own house in order.

The Supreme Court has ruled that OLIPPAC unduly restricted MPs' discretion. Votes of no confidence are exercised on the floor of Parliament (and its corridors) and don't entail the wider public directly. However, the public is watching closely and will shortly have their chance to vote, so whoever obtains or retains power for the remaining duration of this Parliament will have to perform to the voters' satisfaction, or they'll get short shrift then, with an increasingly politically aware and outspoken public, which now seems to focus more on issues and less on tribal allegiance, at least in urban areas.

The public is widely disillusioned with politicians (and non-performing or manipulative public servants), although those who do perform (as in NCD) are recognised and widely commended. The national leadership is being rebuked for apparently having lost touch with wider public concerns and pursuing an agenda perceived as entrenching the interests of a small political elite (and selected businesses). However, there seems little public interest in drawn out political haggling or power struggle. Most simply want government to perform its job effectively and an end the incessant reported and largely unresolved abuses of money and power, and the paternalistic approach that 'we know best what's good for you'. They seek a set of leaders, from whichever party, who listen and focus upon accountability.

Some might prefer the neat, if somewhat ruthless, Australian-style, overnight leadership substitution, (although, as elsewhere, critics – outside and within government - should probably be cautioned against personifying all problems in one man, when they may lie in a wider political culture or system; by purging one man, one might find oneself ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’); others may seek a more extensive change, perhaps bringing the Opposition into power, whilst others might prefer the current leadership remains, but demonstrating less authoritarian tendencies and a clearer commitment to dialogue and reform; whichever way, let the driving force of political events this week, or later, be national interest and commitment to transparent and accountable government, not simply opportunism, pursuit of positions, and other rewards and privileges.

PNG have seen strong economic growth in recent years, and weathered the global financial and economic storm better than many countries. This has resulted largely from external factors, notably growing international demand (especially from booming East and South Asian markets) and high prices for PNG export commodities, plus reforms largely in the early 2000s and economic prudence by the Treasury and Central Bank.

Sadly, the opportunities provided by the strong growth and stable government have been partially wasted, with inadequate inclination to tackle the crucial issues facing the country, and undue readiness to make political compromises. Positive progress has been made with sub-national financing inequities, land reform and some social reforms, although requiring more momentum and support, and reluctantly with overdue ICT reform. What’s lacking has been tangible measures to ensure development opportunities are sustainable and broad-based. Core policies, including the National Directive Principles, MTDS (2005-10) and MDG commitments have been substantially ignored in practice. How could national road maintenance receive a paltry K6 million for 2010 for the whole country (net of emergency expenditure), when the MTDS gives priority to transport access (notably maintenance) as the basis for improving livelihoods and service delivery?

The recurrent Budget continues to contain extensive waste and misalignment with needs, whilst the Development Budget with the MTDS priorities are inconsistent in practice (despite suggested compliance); this is particularly because of the preponderance of political projects, outside sectoral priorities. Despite growth, resource wealth and strong prospects, economic opportunities and services (except mobile phones) have failed to reach the growing population and in many cases, especially in rural areas, continue to deteriorate. PNG will fail to meet any of the MDG targets, which is a pretty damning indictment. Despite statements over phasing out overseas aid, the reality has been that development assistance has been critical for providing much basic infrastructure and services, with government fritting much of its development budget on lower priority and sometimes marginal projects (including new roads to nowhere, when what’s in place continues deteriorating). Large sums have been spent on prestige projects and equipment, when much smaller amounts could make a dramatic positive impact on the lives of millions, through restored or maintained

feeder roads, airstrips etc. In a country, which is so over-governed, with multiple institutions and tiers of sub-national government, immediate mechanisms to rationalise and structural reform are essential, based upon overall agreed objectives, with tackling corruption an underlying prerequisite.

Deputy Prime Minister, Temu, should be commended for pursuing shared common long term goals and consensus. Vision 2050 provides valuable insights, although it needs improving, refining and progressively revising, with some components, so far, entailing inadequate feedback, whilst other sectors, like health, still largely omitted.

The National Strategic Plan (NSP) and ensuing MTDP, however, fail, so far, in their purpose of creating a clear and practical plan to achieve national development objectives. Whilst conceptually valuable and entailing intensive effort over a short period, the lack of consultation with other government agencies, let alone wider society, is starkly apparent. NSP contains some constructive ideas and collates valuable data, but much of its content, including targets, forecasts, policy means and objectives, remains severely unrealistic, unsuitable or untested. It is reminiscent of former Soviet-block long term plans, which were unachievable, and merely resulted in falsified national statistics.

If long or medium term plans and strategies are of any value they must be realistic and based upon identifying realistic prospects and real constraints for both private sector and government for fulfilling their respective objectives. Expecting a 10 fold increase in meat production, 8-fold for coffee, 6-fold for cocoa, 4-fold for copra and 3 fold for oil palm (etc) over the next twenty years, when some crops have barely changed output over the past 30, is ludicrous; if forecasting is useful it must be based upon real understanding of past and current constraints, like access, land availability and suitability, returns to land or labour etc, theft etc., which remote 'central planners' don't possess, unless they consult. Undertaking sophisticated economic modelling for 5 or 20 year periods, has little value if inputs are severely flawed. Perhaps, the Planning Department's time might be better spent tracking and exposing current development expenditure, at national and sub-national levels, and pursuing better alignment with priorities. If the Department (and ORD) feel the misalignment results from political pressures, rather than Departmental deficiencies, then the information on Trust Funds and expenditure would be apparent to Parliament and public alike.

The public is interested in practical issues, notably: - ensuring current and future livelihood, access to land and marine resources, education and health services and affordable housing. They're tired of deals by leaders (and officials) appearing to sell out national interests for private gain and Parliament operating like a private club. The public, especially the young, are increasingly patriotic, thinking about where the country should head, demanding higher standards of leaders, and aware how leaders in various overseas countries resign over relatively minor misdemeanours, whilst clinging to office here. The young are certainly less willing to acquiesce to older leaders telling them what's good for them; they see too many

mistakes and wish to contribute their ideas now; many feel more educated and committed to PNG's future than established leaders, and able to make their judgement. PNG also has a growing number of highly educated citizens, including a growing diaspora making their mark around the world, (with many more if PNG's education and training capacity was less inadequate).

Whatever happens in Parliament in this week or beyond, it's time to embrace change, greater public accountability and dialogue. We're in the information era, and locking information and power in secretive Government Departments and the hands of a few older men is no longer acceptable, particularly if services are not being delivered. A recent youth workshop in Goroka called for Swiss-style government for PNG, where all major national decisions go to referendum. Rather premature, perhaps, when PNG can barely administer a free and fair election, but the young people especially are not going to be suppressed and demand more Voice and a better future, and institutions, for the country. They seem determined, and they will probably get their way.