

Elections and Looking after our Towns and Cities

Voting time has arrived! PNG has a vibrant democracy, but past elections have been marred by widespread abuse, particularly in some regions, undermining the validity of results. Many voters consider this five-yearly event their only opportunity for any influence, if only removing their sitting Member. Sadly, in recent elections many voters have been denied their basic democratic right, whilst others have abused the right by multiple voting. The validity of many victories has been undermined by fraud, including bribing voters or stacking votes. Whether discovered or not, an athlete's win using drugs or a candidate's victory through cheating are merely lies.

This year let's ensure such abuse is minimised, and, where detected, the authorities intervene and perpetrators punished. PNG has a poor record in dealing with crooks; either electoral cheats or stealing public funds, as demonstrated by the few prosecutions, let alone convictions, following major Inquiries. The recent statement from the Public Accounts Committee Chairman, highlighted widespread abuse and lack of accountability by leaders (including officials) when handling public funds. Recent statements by some political leaders suggesting they're not answerable to anyone, reflects this disrespect, although with elections looming these candidates rather hypocritically appeal to voters again, although too often with unrealistic promises and voter bribery.

Competent and honest public servants are more directly essential than politicians. However, the latter play a crucial role in creating suitable conditions for the public service (and private sector) to perform effectively. Voters must look beyond today and select candidates not just out for themselves and mates, dishing out gifts and driving flash 4X4s, but with the vision, skills and dedication for a better future for the whole community.

Responsible democracy is not just about casting votes or winning seats. It places immense responsibility upon elected members to understand and perform their duties, representing the whole electorate for the duration of Parliament. He/she has not won some big prize, but has a job, with its specific responsibilities, whether in Government or Opposition, minister or back-bencher. He/she must learn those responsibilities and maintain high standards of conduct and accountability to electorate and country. The public, in turn, has a responsibility to understand these functions and responsibilities, and not consider the Member a bank or job provider. MPs' major functions include scrutinising policies, approving laws and ensuring government performs. They're not awarding contracts, implementing projects, or dishing out grants or jobs. The public must hold their MPs accountable and ensure they perform their functions, not abusing their positions.

Elections provide some festivity, with rallies and posters (some illegal) creating colour and mess in our towns and villages. This perhaps provides a suitable time to consider how we should manage our urban centres. These centres (and their leaders) can be judged on their appearance, amenities and opportunities offered and how they treat their inhabitants and visitors. Whilst PNG's population lives mostly in rural areas, our urban

centres not only serve their inhabitants, but also the needs of a much wider rural hinterland, partly dependent upon markets, businesses or services based in town. Many complain about growing settlements, but they're here to stay and, particularly whilst services and opportunities in rural areas remain so poor, towns will retain their lure. Improving their functions also supports those in rural areas, creating markets for rural produce and meeting needs of rural consumers and visitors.

PNG has inadequate funds to waste, but enough for basic infrastructure and services for urban and rural areas, much better than prevail now. We must firstly we get the balance right between urban and rural areas, and between the provinces, and, secondly, ensure funds are used wisely and not squandered, or stolen by corrupt leaders, officials and their mates. Currently NCD absorbs and spends a large slice of the country's public money, whilst some provinces also receive a disproportionate portion (despite atrocious services, as in SHP). Other provinces and districts are starved of needed funds for basic services. MPs, however, recently failed to pass the third Reading of a law intended to provide fairer fund distribution.

When K37 million is blown on untendered 1.5 kilometres urban highways, estimated by engineers to cost K9 million, what's left for priorities, like access roads or medicines?

Our towns comprise largely pedestrians and public transport users, rather than car or even bicycle owners. Many urban dwellers and their rural relatives are dependent upon the informal economy, yet most cities have inadequate markets or other facilities for trading, small-scale manufacturing or food processing by informal or micro/small or medium enterprises. Consumers also seek markets, but many are viewed unsuitable, disorderly or simply unsafe.

A few years back NCD went crazy upgrading roads, at phenomenal expense, whether needed or not. Pleasant and adequate roads were converted into concrete highways, whilst the waterfront disappeared behind concrete walls, threatening to devour length of Ela beach, the Capital's main recreational area.

Urban infrastructure needs some investment and upgrading as the population grows and aged facilities become redundant. But we've often paid several times the competitive price for road and water supply upgrades, as with power and telephony (by State-owned or contracted monopolies!) Paved footpaths are welcome, but when will Two-Mile Hill obtain one, safeguarding walkers from surging traffic? Grand contracts are lucrative, but many urban needs are relatively modest: reliable waste collection and disposal, and adequate recreational facilities.

The former NCD team was starting to make a positive difference and listening to the public, before being kicked from office. Financial waste was being reduced, with staff addressing community needs and even developing tourism prospects.

Many of PNG's towns have fine natural settings. Some, like Rabaul, Madang and Mendi are stunning. Although denigrated, Port Moresby has a splendid location, if relatively

drab during the dry season. It's undermined by law and order problems, unsightly security fences, inadequate recreational and other public amenities, and extensive rubbish on land, sea and beaches, with substandard waste disposal (especially in coastal villages and settlements). Whilst urban residents should demand more accountability from their leaders (including town planners and managers), residents must contribute more themselves to keeping their towns habitable and protecting public assets, not leaving it all to authorities.

There has been a tradition amongst some Lands Ministers and officials to award themselves prime urban land, although the current Lands Minister started addressing overdue land administration problems. Our towns have seen designated recreational areas (places to kick a ball or merely walk and relax) swallowed up by encroaching businesses, property, and some settlements. Stores have appeared on recreational land and Knighthoods awarded to their owners (and logging chiefs!), supposedly for community service; which community? Certainly not those seeking a place for recreation!

Urban areas are inevitably short of space, thus requiring careful planning and consultation with stakeholders, to combine residential, retail, commercial, industrial and recreational needs. This includes providing formal and informal sector opportunities, zones for affordable housing, reliable water and essential services, but also pleasant, clean and habitable space, meeting the need to breathe, play sport, enjoy a park and swim in a clean sea or pool. The whole community must contribute to determining and implementing their own vision, reflecting local needs and cultural colour. This is worth fighting for and leaders and officials who squander urban resources (including recreational space) for short term gain should be ousted!

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