

Tomorrow the United States inaugurates its new President. There are high public expectations, not only within the US, but around the world. Barack Obama faces massive challenges, including addressing the faltering US (and global) economy; serious regional conflicts, notably in the Middle East and Africa; restoring the US's tarnished international image (resulting partly from its perceived insularity and ambivalence to international conventions and law), and particularly addressing health, social and poverty, climate and environmental issues at a time when funds are tight.

Of course he will be merely US President, not World President, which is a surprise to some across the planet, who perceive the US having universal responsibilities and capacity. His first attention must be focussed back home, but, in an increasingly globalised economy and with global social, resource and environmental (and security) problems which can only be addressed collaboratively, the US, as the world's largest economy and mandate of a liberal democracy, has a particular responsibility for providing leadership. Barack Obama seems willing and eager to perform that positive role, but global and regional difficulties and conflicts require leadership, commitment and collaboration from the rest of the world. Some issues and problems need a global approach, others need resolving regionally, nationally or locally. Leadership entails taking responsibility and good leadership means abandoning entrenched positions, hearing and understanding different views (including contrary views from other social and ethnic groups) and addressing them collaboratively. Leadership is not about casting blame, sidetracking responsibility or expecting others to fix one's own problems.

The US has gained a determined new leader, though time will assess his performance. He'll certainly need all the support and cooperation available. Does PNG have any leadership ready to really acknowledge this country's many problems and address them, rallying support from across the community, even if it entails forfeiting apparent immediate political or financial gain? Who will stand up and be counted, struggling to restore infrastructure and services to rural communities (which formerly had access to health facilities with medicines and MCH clinics, District banking facilities, local roads or government air/boat charters)? Who will acknowledge that current District funding systems are largely unsuitable? Who will acknowledge that particularly our rural schools are inadequate and substandard, or that law and order problems (and particularly violence against women and children) and levels of corruption in this country are appalling and destroying lives and the fabric of society and the prospects for the country? And who will take some action?

The silence on these issues is almost overwhelming from the national leadership, often seemingly content in their cocoons, oblivious or even denying that problems exist; suggesting sensationalism by foreign reporters or political opponents or blaming deficiencies upon the Public Service. It's true the Public Service, and particularly some institutions, has collapsed substantially, in many cases merely serving its own interests. But it reached this condition partly owing to lack of commitment and foresight by the political leadership, which encouraged appointment of wantoks and other cronies, progressively undermining professionalism, integrity and morale in the public service, until it became a shell without drive, operational resources or capacity to target and implement. Failure can also be assigned to inappropriate political structures, undermining traditional and local leadership structures, and allowing power to be wrested increasingly in the hands of a small National elite, with access to

public and private assets. PNG must be careful to avoid the way of Zimbabwe, where a tiny elite of politicians and associates entrench themselves to power, regardless of their country's economic hardship or popular will. PNG should ensure it reflects and respects the country's multi-cultural and regional nature, which is its great strength, as well posing challenges.

Whilst awareness or commitment to tackling social priority issues seems sadly deficient amongst public leaders, others within the community itself demonstrate the needed dedication and firm leadership skills. Simbu Province alone, for example, has hundreds of volunteers, mostly women, but also men, showing commitment and leadership in challenging and addressing family and sexual violence and promoting community peace and harmony, and this is repeated to different degrees in other provinces. Such commitment comes at a risk, as highlighted by a volunteer in East Sepik recently part-paralysed whilst protecting a women's welfare from domestic violence. Unless the wider community, including political leaders, take a firm stand against such abuse and against atrocities like so-called "sorcery" killings and torture, then the prospects are grim. Those who make the effort, at some risk to themselves, are PNG's true leaders.

Early this month the outspoken editor of one of Sri Lanka's newspapers was assassinated, apparently by persons close to their Government. Lasantha Wickrematunge was dedicated to exposing the truth, particularly calling upon Sri Lanka's leadership to address the underlying issues and respect human rights even during their long and ruthless conflict with the Tamil Tigers. Often derided by political leaders in PNG and overseas good journalists play a critical role, usually for modest reward, and too often face threat and intimidation (or worse). PNG's good journalists and network of bloggers play a valuable role of opinion shaping and leadership. The press and blogsites have bemoaned the start of 2009 in PNG, with tragic murders of prominent citizens and other innocent victims. PNG must address our crime problem concertedly, through thoroughly reinforcing our police and justice system and addressing the lack of management and pervasive corruption undermining components, combined with a major public awareness exercise. But we mustn't merely address symptoms, but also the underlying problems, including lack of employment, education and training opportunities and effective rural health services, which have encouraged urban migration to settlements. Unexplained and excessive mortality also encourages superstition and payback killings.

Whilst political leaders buy property and travel incessantly overseas, escaping domestic pressures, they cannot really hold up their heads in international forums whilst PNG's social indicators and progress on achieving Millennium Development Goals remains so inadequate and whilst human rights violations and particularly abuse of PNG women and children prevails at appalling levels. PNG could make a significant contribution to addressing global social and political, environmental/climate, and even economic issues. It retains a relatively pristine environment, with significant though not unlimited natural resources, which could provide sustainable (and in some cases increased) contributions (or CO2 absorption) towards domestic and international demand, given increased care in extraction, resource and waste management.

Better care of PNG's natural environment is needed, including in urban areas, as with Governor's Pakop's NCD Clean-up Campaign. PNG is not one of the major polluters, like various East Asian industrial economies, but some extractive industries have bad track records, jeopardising other natural resources and livelihoods. International fishing fleets also compete increasingly anarchically for declining marine stocks in PNG's maritime zone, wasting extensive bycatch (other fish, turtles and mammals), sometimes falsifying records. Our cities, and increasingly coastal villages, discard increasing quantities of plastics and other waste into the sea, combining with a growing cesspit of other global (including industrial and agricultural) waste dumped ultimately offshore, now swirling around the Pacific, killing turtles and other marine life, and threatening coastal and deep sea resources, especially when combined with effects of global warming on reefs and coastal communities.

However, whilst betel-nut stains are unsightly, they are not seriously damaging the environment. Simply banning betel-nut from NCD isn't the solution, when it is a major source of income for rural producers and urban informal traders. A more comprehensive programme of waste and sanitation management, awareness and penalties is required, combined with respect for human rights by authorities, provision of suitable facilities for safe and hygienic informal sector use, rather than merely removing settlements, sellers and other prohibitions.

Let 2009 be the year when the authorities seriously work with the community, and its (including business) leaders, in acknowledging and addressing PNG's main law and order and other social problems, whilst facilitating competitive private sector (including informal sector) development to sustain economic and employment growth. We must improve natural resource management to meet PNG's own and wider global needs, but like the USA we must start with recognising and addressing our own problems, before being able to contribute meaningfully to regional and global issues. Will PNG produce its own new generation of dedicated leaders, or who might PNG's Obama be?