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**Australia in the Rudd Era –
Will Australia engage more with PNG and the Pacific?**

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“Australia in the Rudd Era – Will Australia engage more with PNG and the Pacific?”

**A Public Address by Sean Dorney
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As part of Australia Week 2008

About a month ago, when Paul Barker and I were tossing around ideas for my subject matter tonight – he suggested a theme with some focus on PNG, Australia and their relationship. So I emailed him back, asking if I could keep it brief and simply get up and paraphrase what Kevin Rudd had just said in the Australian Parliament to the Stolen Generation – “Oh, look, all I want to say to the people of Papua New Guinea about our complex relationship is – Sorry, sorry, sorry!” And then I’d sit down?

In fact, like a lot of you Paul, who does have a reasonable sense of humour, did not think that was appropriate or even funny. And, indeed, “Sorry” is not quite the right word. I don’t believe that we, non-Aboriginal Australians, need to be as apologetic to the people of this country as, perhaps, we need to be to the indigenous people of our own. After all, we opened up the ballot boxes to Papua New Guineans here in 1964 – a year before Aborigines were allowed to vote in Queensland State elections and three years before Aborigines were even permitted to be included in the Australian census. Nevertheless, the topic that Paul and I eventually agreed on was: “Australia in the Rudd Era – will Australia engage more with PNG and the Pacific?” Over the past month since we chose that theme, Kevin Rudd and his Government have gone out of their way to try to provide us with an absolutely gold-rolled, positive answer to that question and, in the process, make me look a bit of a silly fool for even asking it.

Australia’s Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, and the Parliamentary Secretaries for Pacific Island Affairs and Development Assistance, Duncan Kerr and Bob McMullan, all flew to Solomon Islands for a meeting with other Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers over the Regional Assistance mission, RAMSI. Mr McMullan and Mr Kerr had already, by then, visited Samoa and Tonga. And Mr McMullan had been quoted in the Tongan capital, Nuku’alofa, as saying: “Pacific Islanders are keen to engage with a new Federal Government which is not just sitting in Australia and sending cheques”. And then, of course, last week, we had Prime Minister Kevin Rudd making his triumphant tour of Port Moresby, Goroka and Honiara proclaiming a “new era” in Australia’s relations with the Pacific.

I’ll be examining a little later what that “new era” might mean and some of the detail of what Prime Minister Rudd outlined in his very ambitious Pacific Policy document that he released here just six days ago, what he called the Port Moresby Declaration. But first, I do have to confess that my current knowledge of Papua New Guinea is a little scatty. As you must know, I no longer cover PNG day-to-day, that is now the job of our ABC PNG Correspondent, Steve Marshall. I try to cover the rest of

the Pacific, the thirteen other Pacific Island States and the French, American and New Zealand territories. Ooh, how New Zealand hates that – still being included as a colonial power in the 21st Century. They've tried twice with United Nations support to get the fifteen hundred people of Tokelau to agree to govern themselves but those inconsiderate Tokelans just won't break free of the Kiwi colonial bonds, damn it, and deliver on the referendum majority required! Anyway, because I'm now far more up to date with Australia's relations with those other Pacific entities, my topic includes relations with the Pacific as well as PNG and quite a few of my references tonight, therefore, as regards Australia's behaviour, will draw on other Pacific examples rather than Papua New Guinean ones.

I was in the Solomons last week preparing an eight minute television report for Australia Network's current affairs program, *NewsHour with Jim Middleton*, on the improved Australia/Solomon Islands relationship. It has improved dramatically since the change of leadership in both countries – Rudd having replaced Howard in late November and Dr Derek Sikua having replaced Manasseh Sogavare in mid-December. Although in Prime Minister Skiua's case it was via a Vote of No Confidence, not elections. Remember them – Votes of No Confidence? Papua New Guinea used to have 'em! Plenty of 'em. That was before Sir Mekere Morauta convinced the MPs here to change the Constitution with the unintended result, I think Mekere would ruefully agree, that Sir Michael Somare is now well into his sixth straight year in office. Anyway, back to the Solomons. Mr Sogavare could hardly be described as being fond of Australia or of too many Australians although he has had a warm relationship with one particular Aussie – an Indo-Fijian, naturalised Australian, a guy named Julian Moti. Moti was here, too, wasn't he? Briefly. Skipped bail, I believe. That's right! And he got a free, midnight flight out of the country courtesy of the PNGDF, I recall. Now, who on earth would have authorised that?

In any event, it didn't seem to come up as a major issue here between Mr Rudd and the Grand Chief last week and, back in December, Kevin Rudd had thanked Dr Sikua for deporting Moti to Australia from the Solomons to face child sex charges. But even Mr Sogavare - whose "good friend, Julian" is now on bail awaiting his next court appearance in Brisbane – even Mr Sogavare is enthusiastic about this new Australian Prime Minister. In an interview he granted me last Thursday, Manasseh Sogavare said: *"Yes, you know, I think this is a fantastic opportunity for Solomon Islands too – this change of government in Australia and Rudd. He's willing to sit and listen, have dialogue. So it's a fantastic opportunity for Pacific Island leaders which is now availing itself to get a more understanding relationship with Australia which it should be."* If I was Mr Rudd, though, I would not get too carried away with that endorsement. If Moti was still the Solomon Islands Attorney General and Mr Sogavare the Prime Minister, there might have been quite a different mood to the visit by Australia's new PM to the Solomons last Saturday, if it had happened at all. In the Solomons case, the Rudd Government has really struck it lucky – for the time being at least.

Permit me to digress a moment and tell you a joke relayed to me in the Solomons by somebody who heard it from one of the Tongans who is part of the regional assistance mission, RAMSI. It's a very Pacific story about two Tongan pastors who were talking about their respective Christian flocks. One said his bicycle had been stolen and he was certain one member of his congregation was the thief. "Ah," said the second Tongan Minister. "What you should do is give a sermon next Sunday about the Ten Commandments and when you get to 'Thou Shalt Not Steal' you should pause and look accusingly around the church. The guilty party might then

repent and leave your bike where you can find it." The first Tongan pastor thought this was an excellent suggestion. The following week they met again. The second pastor asked him if he had recovered his bicycle. "Oh, yes, I've got it back," the first Tongan pastor replied. "I followed your advice and I spoke about the Ten Commandments. But, you know, I never got down to 'Thou Shalt Not Steal'. When I was speaking about 'Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery' I remembered where my bike was!"

Well, as anyone who has been a student of Australia's relations with the Pacific would know, Australia's own dealings with the region are regularly studded with little pinpricks of hypocrisy. Let me say that I think it was a little unfair of Mr McMullan to suggest that the Howard Government just sat in Canberra "writing cheques". No Australian Foreign Minister over the past thirty-plus years since most of the island countries achieved independence devoted so much of his time and energy to addressing Pacific problems as did Alexander Downer. Mr Downer's plummy accent may have offended some but he did take a real interest in the region – and right from the start. He visited the island countries constantly. Each year in December after the yearly break-up of the Parliament in Canberra, until other issues like the Fiji coup distracted him in 2006, he would haul half a dozen Members of Parliament of all political persuasions on a Pacific tour. I went on several of them. The Pacific has never been a sexy destination for Australian Parliamentarians but Downer took a whole swag of them over the years through the region. He and the New Zealand Labour Party Government Minister, Phil Goff, struck up an excellent relationship and together they dragged both of their Governments' Foreign Affairs Departments into taking the Pacific far more seriously. I was with Downer and Goff in Honiara in late 2002 when it was obvious to all three of us that the Solomons was not getting out of its spiral towards failure as a State.

Despite putting his name in February of 2003 to what I suspect was a Departmental brief that Australia should never mount a military intervention into the region, Mr Downer was prepared, only a few months later, to do a complete policy somersault and urge Prime Minister Howard to authorise the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in mid 2003. That came after the then Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, pleaded to Canberra for help because the out-of-control special constables signed up on the government payroll as a bribe to end the ethnic war kept extorting whatever money the Solomons Treasury held and fired shots over the Prime Minister's residence. I am not seeking to be an apologist for Alexander Downer. By the time the Australian Federal election rolled around last year, he had been in the job so long some positions had become a little too firmly entrenched. He had three Pacific countries with which relations were, at best, awkward and at worst, poisonous: Fiji, Solomon Islands and here, PNG. And it was not all totally Alexander's fault, you would have to agree, but a change of government in Canberra provided a welcome circuit breaker. However, the Labor Party's record on Pacific relations, when in power previously, is not one to get too euphoric about. Lets review a little history in PNG's case.

Goff Whitlam is the Prime Minister who championed Papua New Guinea's independence. But he was so keen to get Australia out of being a colonial power that in 1974 – and I was here then in that now wrecked old Parliament building in town covering the Constitutional debates for the NBC – Whitlam was urging greater speed while Somare was saying, "Hey, give us a little more time." September the 16th, 1975, was about a year later than Goff's proposed PNG Independence Day. And just one month before PNG did become independent, Sir Michael got a big shock on a

visit to Canberra. Whitlam had told him there would not only be no long term aid agreement but that PNG would get \$A36 million less than it was expecting in the 1975-76 Australian budget. "I feel as though Australia has broken my back," Somare said at the time. "The Australian Government has made a mess of administering the Australian economy and as a result, PNG will suffer." He blamed the failure of his mission to Canberra on, and this is another quote, "an arrogant and ignorant bunch of Treasury advisers who know nothing about PNG's problems". Gee! Here we are 33 years on – has anything changed?

The Australian Treasurer back in 1975 was Bill Hayden. Years later, according to Brian Toohey's *The Eye* magazine, as Foreign Minister, Hayden was to write to his Department that PNG's leaders suffered from "limited maturity". Hayden was never much an admirer of PNG. In 1986, with Hayden responsible for the foreign aid budget, the Hawke Government unilaterally revoked a five-year aid commitment – a document that Hawke had signed only the year before. As in 1975, PNG felt aggrieved. Gareth Evans was the next Australian Labor Party Foreign Minister to tire of dealing with PNG and the Pacific. That Labor Government appointed Gordon Bilney to look after Australia's Pacific relations while Evans concentrated on "the real world".

I think it is from that rather sober perspective of how PNG and the Pacific have figured in the mind frame of previous Australian Labor Governments that we need to examine the Rudd Government's new Pacific policy. Actually, it makes the Rudd Government's initial Pacific forays seem even more remarkable and impressive. I had only the one real discussion with Kevin Rudd when he was Labor's Shadow Foreign Minister. This was several years ago outside the ABC Radio studios in Brisbane. And Mr Rudd's major concern in that exchange we had was with Taiwan and the Chinese-Taiwanese cheque book diplomacy in the region that can be so disruptive to the whole good governance agenda. I remember coming away from our chat concerned that the Pacific might not be much of a priority for him. This may explain my own jaundiced mind-set that led me to suggest the question that has become tonight's address topic. Well, given the events of the past week, it looks like I could not have been more wrong. I'm used to that, being wrong. As I've often said about Papua New Guinea – "Don't ask me what's going to happen – it's too unpredictable for that. But after it has happened, I might be able to have a stab at telling you why it did."

On that matter of not being able to forecast developments, one of my major embarrassments in recent years was flying out of Solomon Islands in June 2006 just before the capital, Honiara, exploded. I'd been there for 21 days covering the national election campaign, the vote, the count and the inevitable tug-of-war for MPs' loyalty. That also used to be a feature of PNG politics before Sir Mekere's profound constitutional change here which now gives the PNG political party winning the most seats such a commanding advantage. Solomons' politics is still like PNG used to be. The crowd outside the Parliament in Honiara was expecting a new Government. Sir Allan Kemakeza's party was on the nose and his supporters had not done that well. So there was some dismay when his Deputy Prime Minister, the distinctly unpopular Snyder Rini, emerged as the victor. I recorded some of the early carry on – shouting and booing – but I'd seen a bit of that before. When Kemakeza himself had been announced as Prime Minister after the previous election, Johnson Honimae, one of the Pacific's great journalists, then with the SIBC, asked Sir Allan about the reception he'd got from the crowd. "Sir," Johnson said, "it was like the Governor General had just told them that one of their relatives had died." I'd also

seem some rowdy scenes outside the Parliament here in Port Moresby so I was not particularly perturbed. In fact, I had my eye on the clock. If I didn't catch my plane out of Honiara that afternoon, I'd be stuck there for another three days.

So I went to the airport, filed a story or two on my mobile phone about Snyder Rini's news conference and jumped on the plane. When I landed in Brisbane three hours later, my switched on mobile burst into life with a series of ever more scornful messages from head office demanding to know where I was and what I was doing while Honiara's Chinatown was on fire. It took me two days to get back there. The day after I flew out and was still in Brisbane, the ABC had me on a live cross into the mid-day television news and Paul Lockyer asked, "Sean, could anyone have predicted this mayhem in Honiara." I just put up my hands and said, "Not me for one, Paul!" Off air later, he laughed and said, "Don't worry, mate. I left Tiananmen Square and flew out of Beijing just before the tanks rolled in." By the way, Snyder Rini, the man whose election sparked what some called the anti-corruption and anti-Chinese riots of 20 months ago, is now the Finance Minister in the new Solomon Islands Government. That could prove a challenge for the Australians in the Solomons Finance Ministry who are part of RAMSI's institution building exercise.

It's time to look now at that impressive document – Kevin Rudd's "Port Moresby Declaration". Speaking at the business breakfast last Friday, Prime Minister Rudd said the Declaration symbolised Australia's new approach to the region. Many of you will have either heard or read some of the detail but here is the summary that Mr Rudd himself provided to that breakfast:

The core of the Declaration is that Australia will begin to negotiate Pacific Partnerships for Development with the nations of the Pacific. These partnerships will provide a new framework for Australia and the Pacific island nations to commit jointly to achieving shared goals. Under the Pacific Partnerships for Development, the Government of Australia will be prepared to provide increased development assistance over time. We will do so in a spirit of mutual respect, mutual responsibility and mutual cooperation.

Mr Rudd then nominated the areas these Development Partnerships would embrace:

- improving economic infrastructure;
- enhancing private sector development;
- achieving quality, universal basic education;
- improving access to basic health services; and
- enhancing governance, including the role of civil society, and the role of non government organisations in basic service delivery.

It's excellent stuff. But I do suspect there are some people in AusAID saying, "Weren't we already trying to do some of this?" There is no doubt in my mind, however, that this is a significant development. We now have a Prime Minister in Australia who has, very early in his term, spelt out an ambitious program to guide Australia's policy regarding the Pacific. Mr Rudd also announced last week an increase of \$A25 million in Australia's aid to PNG in 2008-09. This is despite the considerable flak Mr Rudd is now under in Australia over plans to cut back domestic spending in the budget. Mr Rudd said this extra funding for PNG would go to education, health, law and justice support and incentive based payments. The

"incentive based" payments intrigued me. Mr Rudd said they offer the possibility of "more funding once jointly agreed performance criteria are met".

Back in the early 1990s when I was the In-Country Manager of an Australian aid funded program of assistance to the National Broadcasting Corporation, we had an agreement with the then PNG Government that in return for the help Australia was giving to the NBC, Papua New Guinea would inject some hundreds of thousands of Kina into the NBC's next budget allocation to pay for new equipment. It was going to buy brand new recorders and all sorts of other gear that the NBC desperately needed. However, despite the MOU, this money never materialised. The next budget had no provision whatsoever for it.

"Mutual respect, mutual responsibility and mutual cooperation" are undoubtedly fine sentiments. And I detect a suggestion in Mr Rudd's comments that in the recent past it was the Howard Government that probably was at fault in delivering on the respect side of this equation while, and, of course, I am speculating here, there's an implied allegation that PNG might have been falling down on the "responsibility" and "cooperation" side. But with these new Pacific Partnerships for Development all of that is in the past and, from now on, Australia will be right up there with the "respect" bit and the PNG politicians and bureaucrats will deliver on being "responsible" and "cooperative". Well, I think I can hear Alexander Downer muttering, "Good luck, Kevin."

Don't get me wrong. I might sound overly cynical but, in truth, I hope the Pacific Partnerships for Development concept works, and works well. And that Australia and the region enter a new phase of positive growth. However, we have to be realistic and I was pleased to see that Mr Rudd also stated that he had "no illusions that Australia and PNG will need to work hard – harder than we ever have," he said, "to move our relationship up a gear". He went on to say he was determined that the relationship would move up that extra gear and, as he put it, "show the world how two diverse and different nations in the same region are capable of tackling contemporary challenges".

"Diverse and different" is absolutely right. But I fear there are not enough Australians who really understand how "diverse and different" PNG is. They often know it – "Yeah, PNG's a bit, well, you know, diverse is a good word and, yeah, different, it's certainly different." They know it but they don't understand it. And this is where we often run into problems in agreeing to the proper meaning of what might seem to the bureaucrats and politicians in Canberra like some pretty basic terms. Terms, for instance, like "respect", like "responsibility" and like "cooperation". So, although the Pacific Partnerships for Development are going to be based on, to quote Mr Rudd, "a spirit of mutual respect, mutual responsibility and mutual cooperation", there is a lot of work to do in sealing up deals that both sides can honour in meeting agreed definitions of these key words - respect, responsibility and cooperation.

And this is where it gets really complicated for Australians. One of the fascinating things about PNG's diversity and its 850 plus languages is that you Papua New Guineans have your own, multiple different definitions of these terms – respect, responsibility and cooperation. It would not surprise me at all if there were 600 different interpretations within this country of what constitutes proper respect or of how far responsibility extends. And as for cooperation ... oh, please. Within the language group it is possible. But across language groups and across provinces your

cultural differences provide the possibility for all shades of meaning and disagreement. I'm probably exaggerating and there are, without doubt, great examples of how Papua New Guineans have cooperated on all sorts of things. But I hope you get my point and that Mr Rudd understands it. I firmly believe that PNG is one of the most difficult and complex places in the world to run in anything like the Western definition of efficiency. And that is something most Australians find it difficult to grapple with.

A year or so ago, I was invited to a seminar in Sydney at which the Australian relationship with the Pacific was to be discussed. I was put on a panel dealing with PNG even though by then I had not been reporting from Port Moresby for more than five years. The night before, a few of us, Pacific Islanders and Australians who had been friends for some time got together in one of the delegate's rooms to offer suggestions on what she should say. One of the Fijians present said, "Well you can't just be critical, you've got to say that Australia has actually done some good things." That prompted the following comment from one of the Australians there who has been a lucid and wise commentator on Australia's performance over many years in the region. She said, "No, don't go praising the Aussies from the start. Kick 'em in the arse before you pat 'em on the back." Jokingly, I said, "You know what our problem in PNG is. We don't understand it enough and so all too often we kick 'em in the back and then pat 'em on the arse which can give very conflicting signals." It was a joke but how often does truth emerge from things said in jest.

Yesterday's editorial in *The Australian* newspaper had a go at analysing Kevin Rudd's visit to PNG and the Solomons. It noted that he had received "a rock star-style reception in the highlands" and it listed some of the promises he'd made. "But behind the photo-ops, flag waving school children and generous handouts loom some stormy issues," *The Australian* intoned. "The Howard Government's tough-love approach made it unpopular in the region," the paper's editorial went on, "but if Mr Rudd is to make good his commitment to target aid effectively, he can expect the same complaints about unwanted meddling from certain Pacific neighbours." *The Australian* mentioned the weekend burning down of Nauru's police station, the Fiji Government's deportation of newspaperman, Russell Hunter, (who once worked here and is married to a Papua New Guinean) and it castigated PNG for its poor rating on the UN Human Development Index. The editorial wound up by saying that the "Rudd Government should be under no illusions that the problems of the Pacific will simply disappear by tinkering with policies or changing rhetoric".

It is hard for me to disagree with too much of that editorial but part of the reason for the generally weak understanding in Australia of the complexities of the Pacific region is that the Australian media does not take it seriously. With the exception of the ABC and AAP, no Australian correspondents have been based in Port Moresby since the early 1980s. In the area I now cover, the rest of the Pacific, there is nobody from the Australian commercial media – print, television, radio or online – who is regularly covering the region. Mary-Louise O'Callaghan used to be the South Pacific Correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* but they dumped her in the early 1990s. She was taken on by *The Australian* and despite winning that newspaper a Gold Walkley, Australia's highest journalistic honour, in 1997 for breaking of the Sandline mercenaries story, *The Oz* sacked her as well. There are one or two journalists who try to report on the region from Australia but they get little support from their media organisations and they find there is virtually no funding for trips into the Pacific – unless there's a coup or a burning down of a Chinatown. I find this incredible considering the amount of money Australia now

spends in PNG and the Pacific – hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars a year. When it comes to how the Australian Government is spending taxpayers money in this part of the world, the mainstream Australian media are failing woefully in their proclaimed “watchdog” role.

Having said that, Papua New Guinea does itself no favours in the way it treats Australian journalists. Journalists wanting to come to PNG to report on anything have to apply for a \$A220 journalist’s visa. These can take weeks to secure if at they are approved at all. I’ve gone two weeks waiting in Brisbane unable to travel anywhere else because the Consulate has had my passport waiting for approval to issue me with a visa. Most Australian journalists when they do get here after being put through this rigmarole are in no mood to write “positive” stories. I would say to the PNG Government: “Have a look at this policy. Has it succeeded in improving PNG’s international image?” I think any policy that has consistently failed for 33 years needs to be dumped. Let the journalists in with visas they can collect at the airport on arrival. You can’t control what is going to be written but if more journalists come then Papua New Guinea’s true story in all its magnificent complexity is more likely to be told.

On this subject of people moving between Australia and Papua New Guinea, I note that Kevin Rudd is showing possible flexibility on Pacific labour mobility. This is going to be a significant issue in the negotiations about to start on the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations, PACER. The so-called PACER Plus talks have to begin now between the Pacific Islands on the one hand and Australia and New Zealand on the other because Pacific nations are entering into new trade agreements with the European Union. The Pacific Islands Forum is going to play hardball on behalf of the Island Nations on trade in services – one of which is labour. Mr Rudd said last Friday that Australia is looking closely at what he described as this “complex” issue. He said his government was following New Zealand’s pilot Pacific Labour program very closely and he hoped to discuss labour mobility at the Pacific Islands Forum in Niue later this year. That discussion will be awaited eagerly by many Pacific leaders.

I just want to make two more points on the Rudd Government and whether its new engagement with the Pacific is going to endure. The first is that in Duncan Kerr, Mr Rudd has got a Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs who has actually lived in the region – here in Papua New Guinea when he was Dean of Law at the University of Papua New Guinea. I don’t recall meeting Duncan all that much in the 1980s but then I was deported in 1984 and didn’t get back until 1987 so our times probably did not coincide that well. But this is a real plus for PNG and the region – having someone there in Canberra at the political level who knows the place and got to know some Papua New Guineans who are now in pretty senior jobs themselves. I was delighted to read in the latest Journal of the Papua New Guinea Association of Australia that a proposal has been made direct to Mr Kerr to establish a regional think tank at the old Australian School of Pacific Administration site on Middle Head in Sydney. ASOPA was the place where Kiaps and others were taught about PNG before and during their deployments back in the colonial days. A number of us have been suggesting that the School of Pacific Administration should be re-established now that Australia is sending all sorts of people out into the Pacific to work in RAMSI in the Solomons and other places like PNG. If Australia is to be deploying people into the region, the re-establishment of ASOPA to give them a bit of education about where they are going seems to me eminently sensible.

My colleague, Graeme Dobell, filed a report from the Canberra Press Gallery recently in which he said this whole Pacific re-think has also been evident in the maiden speeches of new Labor MPs in the Australian Parliament. The incoming member for the electorate based around Geelong in Victoria, Richard Marles, devoted part of his speech in the House, Graeme said, to his experiences of Papua New Guinea and PNG's Struggles for identity since independence. "People who have seen themselves as highlanders or from Manus, as Trobriand Islanders or Papuans," Mr Marles told the Parliament, "have been asked to forge a nation combining all of these people and many more. While Australia was a caring and benevolent colonial power," Richard Marles said, "the truth is that we did very little to prepare these people for what has turned out to be a tremendously difficult task." And he said that the bonds between PNG and Australia needed strengthening. "Since 1975," Mr Marles said, "all levels of Australian society, not just government but corporate Australia and the community sector as well, have failed to maintain the bonds which used to exist with Papua New Guinea prior to independence." And the new Labor MP for the New South Wales seat of Robertson, Belinda Neal, ended her maiden speech with a passionate appeal for Australia to do more in the region. "I believe Australia should focus more on our island neighbours in the Pacific region," she said, "and provide greater assistance in developing democratic governments and the rule of law in that region. I believe that Australia can do better. That is why I am here," Belinda Neal told the Australian Parliament. I hope the backbenchers keep the pressure up when the going gets touch for the Rudd Government and this early glow on Australia's Pacific relations gets dim and begins to flicker.

But so far it is all very encouraging and I was particularly pleased to hear that Mr Rudd when he was here last week announced a \$A260,000 package to help develop sports in PNG, particularly Rugby League. I just wish the Australian NRL teams would realise what a huge pool of talent there is in Papua New Guinea. It amazes me that there are not more Papua New Guineans playing for the Cowboys, the Broncos or the Titans. Wake up you guys in Townsville, Brisbane and on the Gold Coast. This is a big, talented feeder area and a potential passionate support base. Having got around to Rugby League thanks to Kevin, I'll end with a tale from when I turned out for the Kumuls in 1976. We were playing one of the combined zones team from country New South Wales. I was playing half-back and we won the game. But at one stage I was caught by two of these huge New South Welshmen in a tackle that surely would have had one of them, the one that went for my head, sin-binned these days. I was concussed and after the next scrum, I threw a dreadful cut-out pass that cut-out our five-eight, Dikina Boge, but never reached our inside-centre. It was intercepted and they scored under the posts. As I stood there behind the goal posts apologising to the team and feeling both guilty and ill, a voice from the crowd yelled out, "He's just trying to help his wantoks." I just hope this address has been of some help to my wantoks in the new Australian Government and that it will not have annoyed them to much. Thank you.

- ENDS -