

What Standards will PNG Accept?

What standards should PNG set itself? As a developing country it should not necessarily apply identical standards to Australia, but PNG should apply high standards for itself, in governance, agricultural products, education, tourism, environmental management, health and safety, etc. In most cases we have sound standards in law and regulations, but then ignore them, or, if applied, do so selectively, letting off certain companies, which roll out red carpets or make contributions. Indeed, nearly everyone seems able to breach rules and standards (or secure exemptions) if they make suitable contributions, whether dangerous and smoking PMVs, stealing containers off wharves, ignoring the forestry code of practice, polluting water courses, or flaunting labour or investment laws with foreign workers in restricted activities, such as trade stores, or providing crude and substandard labour quarters.

Logging companies, for example, sometimes blame officials for their extensive breaches of standards, and they're partly right. Why would businesses, households, or electoral candidates, follow laws if they know they can be ignored readily, with little chance of being caught, but, if caught, charges are dropped, and if there's commercial (or electoral) advantage in ignoring rules. Is this the sort of society we want? One where rules (introduced ostensibly for PNG's benefit) are all ignored, standards not applied, law-abiders are disadvantaged, waste can be dumped in rivers and sea, elections are only winnable by cheating, seas can be bottom-trawled extracting all marine life and causing untold damage and contracts awarded without tender?

Rowan Callick, formerly a journalist here, recently wrote an article on the Pacific's conmen. He mentioned Foster, and others with part of their dubious "careers" spent here. PNG has attracted many international conmen over the years. Many remain, plus some local ones, seeing easy pickings here. When new mining and oil projects commenced in the 1990s, Moresby's hotel lobbies were filled with these men, and one or two women, like the supposed Ethiopian princess seeking a slice of Lihir's gold. They usually offer few resources or skills, other than conning others of their savings or natural resources or tapping trust funds, whilst offering deals and riches, and responding to the greed of various leaders and others.

Some dress flamboyantly and strategically marry into elite families. Some harass officials and politicians, seeking letters of support and promising access to untold donor funds from international financial institutions, EU, Australia, Israel or wherever, despite having no access to these funds. They talk of grand oil, gas, mining, agriculture or forestry projects, but have little relevant experience. Others have some experience, but seek to bypass selection processes for contracts, or natural resource extraction approvals. Local conmen specialise in fast money schemes, collecting fortunes from small investors seeking unrealistic returns, and distributing proceeds to selected leaders and silencing potential critics, whilst pocketing the rest. Other local conmen specialise in supply contracts, perhaps entailing partial delivery of institutional food supplies, and reselling the rest.

Several offered Government about US\$ 500 million, usually in exchange for control over PNG's natural resources. One even claimed to represent Saudi's Royal family and manage their Swiss accounts, yet he could only afford to stay in cheap downtown

accommodation, whilst offering loans of US\$150 to 500 billion! Others offered money laundered from Russia to Columbia, or to plug shortfalls if international funds were halted for breach of loan conditions. Some offered names with questionable reputations, like Tommy Suharto, as credentials! Others promoted expensive bond deals and claimed to have secured exclusive rights from PNG leaders for our exports, including coffee, to USA. PNG authorities wasted time and money checking commen out, confirming them bogus with non-existent offices in Hong Kong or Goldcoast. One with few credentials, claiming to have launched Indonesia and Malaysia's petroleum and gas corporations, was entrusted by some leaders here. Substantial public funds were provided for a second-rate book, with Parliament's funds, private inheritances and Paga Hill heading the same way!

Most commen stand out, but, as with Tonga's court jester and the loss of Vanuatu's budget, readily find naïve and greedy sponsors in PNG, allowing them to flourish. In most cases, fortunately for PNG, these commen are prevented from causing serious damage, despite the best efforts of a few leaders. In some cases, sadly, they're allowed to slip through, and Election time is an especially dangerous period, with aspiring candidates seeking sponsorships and ready to compromise themselves and PNG's assets in return.

There may be a distinction between pure commen, and those with some skills and assets by-passing the rules, but they're really one and the same, just a case of degree. An Italian company lobbied incessantly to supply expensive radar installations, which PNG didn't need. British companies flogged bridges and military gear. They were able to deliver but their methods were questionable. Who knows whether the Italian company being awarded control over PNG's gas/petroleum corporation has any capacity, but that's the question, who knows anything of this whole arrangement, and does PNG stand any chance of benefiting, or is it another behind the scenes deal mortgaging PNG's future? There been many untendered infrastructure schemes, and the Cairns Conservatory deal, where leaders pushed POSF into buying a modest asset for three times its value the previous week. Pretty good going for some, but not POSF's contributors. A logging operator receiving similar support in Brisbane, also secured a timber permit in Gulf, although the State hadn't even acquired the rights from resource owners. That project remains subject to dispute with resource owners, and was one of several found by a Government review to breach forestry laws and agreements. The Forest Minister and a few companies and their consultants persist in proclaiming there's no illegal logging in PNG, differentiating between "illegal logging" and "non-compliance". Most see no difference!

Are these the standards PNG will accept? The majority of businesses and public servant are honest and law abiding. The population, mostly in rural areas, works hard to survive, improve their lives and put kids through school. Some have unrealistic dreams of making fortunes overnight, throwing money away on pokies, win-money schemes, or even overseas scams. There's nothing wrong with dreams, everyone needs them, but in the real world we must be realistic. Small or large businesses grow through steady effort. Fortunes rarely come overnight, unless others (e.g. State, resource owners or other investors) are unfairly deprived.

It's surely time that PNG wakes up and stops being taken for a ride by commen and some leaders associating with them. PNG's has great economic and social prospects if

it applies sound standards and the rule of law fairly and evenly, not if ruled by backdoor deals and ignoring standards, there to protect the interests and safety of its citizens, including workforce, resource owners, producers and consumers. PNG's reputation as relatively unpolluted and environmentally pristine holds major economic potential, for tourism, agricultural exports, sustainable fisheries and even forestry exports. PNG's prospects and its citizens' welfare will be eroded severely, however, if everything is flogged in the meantime through back-door deals often made on overseas trips, and a batch of self-serving leaders gaining office this July. PNG must set its standards high and demand that they're applied. There's no reason for PNG to sell itself cheap and accept third –or even second - best.