

Where does the Pressure come from to Reform and be Accountable?

At Sean Dorney's recent public address on Australia-PNG-Pacific relations, a well-known local social scientist observed that, after years of applying pressure on the PNG Government to improve governance and accountability, surely Kevin Rudd's promise of more aid and brotherly support would let PNG's incumbent administration off the hook to continue mismanagement and misspending.

He has a point, but in reality pressure from the former Howard Government was having limited impact and, whilst concerted outside pressure can contribute, achieving real reform and making politicians and bureaucrats in PNG accountable is largely dependent upon awareness and concerted pressure back home. The major constructive reforms requiring political determination over recent decades, and there've been too few, have entailed a combination of strong public concern and firm support for change, involving press, civil society organisations (including churches), combined with enough dedicated political champions and some international support, particularly to support reform implementation. Often the pressure follows exposure of extensive wrongdoing (e.g. by Commissions of Inquiry into forestry malpractice in the late 1980s and superannuation abuse early this decade),

For example, the major far reaching reforms of recent years, providing the platform for the current economic turnabout, were driven by the former Government of 1999-2002 with firm public and donor support. It was not driven by international institutions. The structural adjustment programme (GPAL) was basically government policy, supported by donors. Despite his Government's deficiencies, including a blow-out 2002 Budget, Morauta was the only leader in recent years with the vision and determination to push through extensive overdue reforms, needed to turn PNG's economy and public sector around, although, admittedly, Bill Skate's Government experimented with radical, but too often ill-conceived or executed, plans. Whilst there have been useful recent reforms planned for lands and applied for public sector appointments and social issues, the 1999-2002 reforms covered the Constitution, politics, banking and superannuation, public sector and State-owned enterprises, forestry governance and various other fields, but Morauta was tripped up, notably over privatisation, when failing to go out and secure public support.

Morauta knew that, with PNG's pork-barrel politics, it was hard to drive through tough reforms with his political colleagues. He used the development partners, and mutually agreed conditions, to add leverage, notably through GPAL, to impose policy discipline on his wavering ranks. This was possible to a certain point, but, with failure to market some policies to the public and an impending Election, his team's adherence to reform weakened.

Increased revenue, largely from improved export commodity prices, combined with prudent fiscal management since 2002, have reduced development partners' (limited) leverage for governance reform and greater accountability. The public has markedly greater leverage to demand accountability, but only if it self-confident. Of concern is the

deep-set, and possibly growing, apparent subservience within the community to leaders, stemming partly from political leaders and cronies have acquired increasing direct control over public funds and assets; (where did all these “paramount chiefs” come from? when the power of bigmen, was always limited in PNG and entailed strong obligations). The growing disillusion amongst a segment of the public, frustrated by PNG’s deficient political and public institutions is also worrying.

Much of the public is alienated from the State, feeling powerless to influence, unable even to cast their vote, let alone for preferred candidates. It is critical to reverse this widespread community disillusion with public institutions, which could lead to undemocratic and antisocial methods of public expression and resentment. The political and bureaucratic leadership must work together with the wider community, including the business sector and churches, but supported by development partners, to promptly restore public confidence in PNG’s largely failing or even failed public institutions, to enable them to be responsive, accountable and deliver services.

This requires reinforcing key democratic institutions, including Parliament’s oversight role, restoring public service management and accountability for public funds, reinforcing media freedom, watchdog institutions and particularly the community’s own confidence, empowerment and capacity to hold leaders and public servants accountable at national, district and local levels.

There is a widespread public view that leaders want to keep the community backward. This view holds that keeping people ignorant allows leaders to control public money, dispersing it though it were their own, gaining grateful thanks and subsequent votes. Why else, they argued, would government and some leaders prevent the community and public institutions (like schools and health centres) from accessing competitive Information and Communications Technology, able to greatly enhance local awareness, interaction, and improve local business and educational opportunities and improve health and other services. Why, they argue, are monopolies protected and competition given lip-service, with ideas liked “phased competition”, preventing public (and business) benefits from reliable and affordable services, to protect some vested interests. They argue that leaders are behaving like old feudal chiefs, controlling, even suppressing their community, preventing entry to other providers of information, income or employment.

Whilst this view may hold truth for some leaders, the explanation in most cases is probably less manipulative. Nevertheless, the nation’s resources have been sucked increasingly into a few cities, with wealth concentrated into a smaller portion of the population. There are some Ministers, MPs and public servants striving to perform their functions professionally, but they’re surrounded by a sea of non-performance in public institutions. Despite increased wealth PNG has slipped back to 145th in the latest UN World Development Index, below 2000’s ranking. After 33 year of Independence, despite producing many professionals holding recognised positions around the world, PNG’s social indicators (such as education access, literacy, life expectancy, child and maternal mortality are the worst in the Pacific and amongst the worst worldwide, (worse than markedly poorer countries).

This should be a matter of national shame and outrage, providing little opportunity for celebration. It demonstrates failure of leadership, incapacity to identify and address the real problems, whilst readily taking easy options, with the elite enjoying the fruits of office. Anger is justified, with so many opportunities to address PNG's problem having been sidestepped, but vested interests protected. Limited real effort has been made to reduce red tape constraining business and investment, including by informal sector participants. Provincial and district services have been drained of operating funds, with funds sucked into corruption and institutions in NCD, where constant overseas trips and trappings of office are seen as a right, rather than responsibility to the community. Under the DSIP (and other programmes, e.g. NADP) there are finally funds available for rural areas, but utilising inadequate systems. District allocations should be for basic services, maintenance and restoration, not for new pet projects.

Restoring simple and workable systems, capacity and accountability, including community ownership and oversight, and enforcement are all critical. PNG's problems are resolvable, not so much through money (some of the richest provinces have the worst services), but through prioritising resources and ensuring funds and human resources are used properly. It also means getting government off the private sector's back, for the latter to invest and run business, (including utilities - power etc, telecommunications and other services). The State should concentrate upon education and training, core infrastructure, health, law and order, ensuring environmental, labour and other standards, setting suitable economic and investment conditions, applying fair and competitive conditions, undertaking research and statistics, town planning, information provision, and supporting some cultural activities. It should not be running telephones, airlines, mines or other businesses.

Easter symbolises commitment to greater good. Improved growth figures mean little unless opportunities and benefits are spread widely through the community. PNG's leadership must be less greedy. Government is there not to bleed the community, but to serve it. There's only so much NGOs and churches servicing the community can achieve alone. It's about time government shoulders its responsibilities. It's hard swimming alone against the current, but there are enough good leaders in national and local politics, public and private sectors and wider community to come together, make a difference and drive a sea-change; the challenges are large but not unachievable, but everyone must play their part.

PNG cannot simply sit and await grand new initiatives, like LNG or carbon trading, to fill draining glasses. We must meet the challenges and address real problems collaboratively, like the corruption, draining medicines from health centres and books from classrooms. We must restore practical systems, routine and pride, following high standards of integrity and performance. That's PNG's responsibility; Australia and other friends can help.