

Program 4 - Nations Within Nations

The idea that we must have a single national identity has its origins in the idea of the nation-state. It's not generally the way we see ourselves anymore.

Creating political systems that share power between diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic communities -nations within nations - has become a pre-occupation of modern nation-states.

In Papua New Guinea, the National Government has successfully negotiated peace with war-torn Bougainville.

The Peace Agreement gives a high degree of autonomy to the island's new government and the promise of a referendum, later, when people can choose full independence or opt to remain a nation within a nation.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Hello -I'm John Westland and welcome to Radio Australia's series Sharing Power - The Ties That Bind. Today's program, 'Nations Within Nations'.

WOMAN'S VOICE:

What is the concept of 'nation'. Fundamental concepts are trying to be resolved through devolution, and as a result there's a real problem because what we're talking about are power-sharing agreements that are political and devolution is just a tool to sort out, basically, a political contract between the communities.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Creating political systems that share power with diverse communities -nations within nations - has become a pre-occupation of modern nation-states.

In much of the Asia–Pacific region, anti-colonial struggles have helped to draw together different ethnic and religious groups. Maintaining national unity in places where there's been no independence fight has proved all the more difficult.

When Australia handed Papua New Guinea self-government in 1975, the nation had to be forged from eight hundred or so different indigenous, linguistic and cultural groups. Prime Minister Michael Somare soon identified secessionism as one of the government's biggest problems.

MICHAEL SOMARE:

At that time, you know, we had a very fragmented country and one of the important tasks I was given at that time was to be able to pull people together and I could see the dangers of secessionism at the same time.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Bougainville in the North Solomons chain of islands had in fact declared itself independent, just 15 days before the Australian colonial authorities granted PNG its independence.

NEWS GRAB:

Bougainville with its multi-million dollar copper mine was today declared politically independent of Papua New Guinea. More than five thousand people, including hundreds of school children turned out at the Arawa town market for a ceremony marking the unilateral declaration of independence. The predominantly blue flag of the self-proclaimed Republic of the North Solomons was raised by a Bougainville woman. Later the former district commissioner of Bougainville, Dr Alexis Sarei, told the crowd that years of neglect by the Australian and Papua New Guinean administrations had forced the island to secede.

JOHN WESTLAND:

To appease the secessionists, Bougainville was to become one of only two pilot provincial governments. But Michael Somare was under pressure to extend provincial government to all of PNG's 19 districts; as he later recalled in an interview with the ABC's Port Moresby correspondent, Sean Dorney.

MICHAEL SOMARE:

So really, I was in a dilemma. I didn't know what to do. We had a secessionist movement in Papua at that time and Bougainville, so I looked at the compromising position. One compromising position was give them some autonomy.

SEAN DORNEY:

Why do you think it went so wrong?

MICHAEL SOMARE:

I think we rushed it. The original idea was try and trial and have two pilot projects, Bougainville was one. Then people of East New Britain who were also there with Malaitan flavour, John Kaputin and his element of people were wanting to also break away. So I said you might as well cater for

Bougainville and New Britain. And then of course people of my own province started giving me a problem, in East Sepik. So I said ok, try three provincial governments and see how they work. And of course the trend of the time was coming too fast for me. So everybody was demanding they should all have district governments. So I said, well why not, why not give them what they want?

JOHN WESTLAND:

It was over a year after independence before all 19 provinces got their own Parliaments. With only 3 million people, Australia didn't think the country could afford a three-tier system of government but PNG's own Constitutional Planning Commission had recommended that the country's founding charter include provincial government.

John Momis, now Governor of Bougainville, was a member of that Commission and later explained to an Australian audience why he'd always advocated sharing power with provincial governments.

JOHN MOMIS:

One of the most important recommendations was to empower people through structural distribution of governmental power, decentralisation. And unfortunately, many leaders in their zeal to impose unity ignored that very important method; that important strategy of creating unity through empowering people. And you know, sharing power, as many of you would know in your own lives actually doesn't mean losing power. You win friends by making them creative stakeholders in what I call the enterprise of nation-building.

SEAN DORNEY:

Once it was written back into the Constitution, it came with a rush to all 19 provinces and a lot of them unlike where Momis came from - Bougainville, and unlike where Kaputin came from; the East New Britain, a lot of the rest of the country wasn't ready for it, didn't particularly want it. But this system came in with a rush throughout the country and in many, many places it was a complete and utter failure.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Sean Dorney reported on PNG politics for the ABC for over three decades and chronicles the evolution of 'PNG's system of government in Papua New Guinea -People, Politics and History since 1975'.

One of the reasons that many provinces found they were not up to the task of running government goes back to the fact that when Australia moved in to govern Papua New Guinea, there was no pre-existing system of administration beyond the village level.

SEAN DORNEY:

What Australia had to do was start a bureaucratic system that went from the bottom right up to the top and that resulted in a government system that relied enormously on what were called 'kiaps', the district officers in the colonial administration. And these fellows had enormous power and they ruled their own little district level in many ways doing everything. They were the policemen, they were backed up by PNG police, they were the magistrates, they were the administrators, they were the judges. They did virtually everything, and when provincial governments started there weren't 19 provincial bureaucracies pre-existing. So in the smaller provinces, you actually didn't have bureaucrats who were running any pre-existing system. There was a very, very good comment made by Tos Barnett, the judge who was appointed to do the major inquiry into corruption in PNG's forestry industry in the late '80s. And he said that just looking at what happened at the provincial level with the forestry department, he said it was as if a mad butcher had attacked the carcass of the national forestry service with a chopper and all staff who happened to be on a posting within the province at the time of the butchering, were simply chopped off the carcass and became the provincial forestry service of that province. Well that didn't only happen in forestry; that happened in all sorts of different government departments. So for instance you would have someone who was in his first year of employment, who all of a sudden took over the complete running of a provincial department and he had no system there to run, he had to set it all up himself. So the lack of expertise was a huge constraint especially on the least developed provinces.

JOHN WESTLAND:

By the early 1990's, no fewer than 10 of PNG's 19 provincial governments had been suspended for financial mismanagement and, in 1993, Prime Minister Pius Wingti announced the National Government's intention to abolish all 19 elected provincial governments.

PIUS WINGTI:

This nation was forced to take on this costly second tier of government as a result of a blackmail from one provincial grouping. The blackmail was essentially give us provincial government or we will leave the rest of Papua New Guinea. Once was enough for Papua New Guinea. We will not allow the same blackmail to take place in Papua New Guinea again.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Tired of financial scandals in so many provinces, the national government had enough support to do away with all of the elected provincial assemblies in 1995.

John Momis said at the time that some responsibility for their difficulties should be sheeted home to the national government that never fully supported devolution of power.

JOHN MOMIS:

When we judge the performance of provincial governments we must not take the provincial governments out of the total context of the nation. We must remember that bureaucracy was against sharing of power so the bureaucracy wasn't ready for it. There wasn't the political will and of course the responsibility to effect these changes was on the shoulders of the national government which was reluctant.

JOHN WESTLAND:

You're listening to Sharing Power on Radio Australia. Today: Nations Within Nations.

NEWS GRAB:

CRA's Bougainville Copper mine in Papua New Guinea has been blasted out of production again. The village landowners who are demanding 14 billion dollars compensation from CRA have destroyed another electricity transmission tower linking the mine to the power station on the coast. It's the second time in four days they've stopped production at the giant open cut mine.

SEAN DORNEY:

Bougainville was the best resourced provincial government, definitely it was one of the better run. The provincial government though had never given up on this idea that Bougainville should eventually be independent. So when the war which started out as a rejection of the Bougainville Copper Mine by the landowners and gradually turned into a secessionist war, the Premier actually sided with the landowners. He himself was a landowner and throughout the early period although Joseph Kabui was siding with the secessionists, he kept telling me that the issue wasn't about secession. All through 1989 when I'd go over to Bougainville and interview him he was saying no, this isn't about secession Sean, you've got it wrong. This is just about the mine. This is about the rights of the landowners. And of course within a year he was the chairman of the Bougainville interim government, which was totally secessionist. So in a way, by the time Moresby decided to do away with provincial governments, the Bougainville provincial government, which had sided with the secessionists was already at war with the national government.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The copper mine on Bougainville had made a significant contribution to PNG's national economy. From 1974, until the mine closed in 1989 after clashes with landowners led to all-out civil war, Bougainville Copper Limited had contributed around 10 per cent of PNG's Gross Domestic Product. It paid the National Government half a billion US dollars in company tax and a hundred and fifty million dollars in dividends.

But Bougainville landowners did not see any of this money coming back into their province; instead, the National Government tended to direct big infrastructure projects to less developed provinces, those which did not already have a major development project under way. For many Bougainvilleans, that was not the sort of development they wanted.

JOHN MOMIS:

The problem with the Bougainville copper mine was that it was an enclave supported by the national government which didn't understand the land tenure system, that didn't really care about the ethical dimension of development; was more concerned about economic benefits to the nation.

JOHN WESTLAND:

John Momis had been made Minister for Decentralisation in Michael Somare's Government after successfully campaigning for greater power sharing in PNG's 1977 elections. When given the Minerals and Energy Portfolio in 1980 he found himself negotiating a new Bougainville Copper Agreement with the provincial Government he'd helped to create.

Now Governor of Bougainville, he recently reflected that the 10-year long civil war that cost something like twenty thousand lives might have been avoided if the National Government had agreed to put a fairer share of resource revenues back into developing Bougainville Island.

JOHN MOMIS:

Had the national government put in place a better system of distribution of the benefits accrued from Bougainville, it would have been much easier to negotiate a democratic and a non-violent solution to the problem.

John Westland, the ABC's Richard Dinnen, reported on the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement.

(Music)

John Westland It's Thursday, August the 30th, 2001 and I'm standing among the thousands of people who've gathered at the sports field here in the middle of Arawa to see the leaders of Bougainville and Papua New Guinea sign the peace agreement. And people have come from all over Bougainville to be part of this and they've been waiting here since early this morning. There are groups of musicians playing the bamboo pipes, dancers are working up a sweat in the blazing sun, and a very large party of big shots are gathered in the shade on the stage. Out in the centre of the field on a smaller stage stands a table, some pens and a peace agreement thrashed out over nearly three years that's now waiting to be signed. And there's a tangible enthusiasm, even impatience for the moment that's about to come. But first the speeches. Mercifully the list of speakers has been cut down to a dozen or so and they'll take their turn before the crowd. The Prime Minister, Mekere Morauta, and a

representative selection of the Bougainville leadership, John Momis, Joseph Kabui, Sam Akoitai, Ishmale Toroama, and then the visiting foreign dignitaries who've flown in for the day.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The Bougainville Peace Agreement provides for a Bougainville Provincial Government with a high degree of autonomy and the promise of a referendum on the question of independence in 10 to 15 years time.

SEAN DORNEY:

What you've got now on Bougainville is far greater autonomy than they had even then, and there is the prospect of course, and this is one of the only reasons the Bougainville resolution has been reached is that there is this option to go to a referendum on independence in 15 years or so. That's one of the reasons the Bougainvilleans agreed to what they have agreed in relation to greater autonomy now.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Joseph Kabui, the President of the Bougainville People's Congress is satisfied that the people of Bougainville at last have a say on how they wish to be governed.

JOSEPH KABUI:

It may so happen that people may say oh we are happy to feel as if we are a nation within a nation, if the majority say ok, let's go for our independence, so be it. If the majority of people say no, let us remain as an autonomous government within the frame of a Papua New Guinea, so be it. We are very happy that the national government has agreed. It's one of the options that Bougainville can have in a referendum the issue of separate independence and now I'm glad that that has come about. So let the people decide. Ten to 15 years is ample time to test us out. My gut feeling is probably people will stick to saying ok, now let's go on our own. But who am I to make that decision for the people, I'd rather leave the people to decide.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Governor Momis believes that if the provisions of the Bougainville Peace Agreement are properly resourced and well implemented then it could become a model for PNG's other provinces.

He spoke to the ABC's Richard Dinnen after the signing of the historic Peace Agreement in 2001.

GOVERNOR JOHN MOMIS:

For a long time the national government and the Bougainville parties were seeing one another as adversaries, under this new agreement, this new deal, new contract, new political order, they are partners. And I believe as partners they will be in a much stronger position to create a common thrust, a positive thrust for nationalism, patriotism and national unity.

John Westland:

It will transfer a great deal of power and with that responsibility here to the leaders that will be elected in Bougainville. Are people ready for that role yet or what has to happen to help them assume that role?

GOVERNOR JOHN MOMIS:

Bougainville certainly doesn't have the capacity yet. We have to work hard to ensure that good governance, respect for law and order. We have to increase our institutional capacity building as well as economic capabilities. I must say the national government must be urged to facilitate the release of funds on time and in adequate amounts because right now in order to divert or to re-direct the energies of our young men who have been traumatised, we need a fair bit of money for trauma counselling, for re-engagement in more creative activities.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The Governor of Bougainville, John Momis.

In next week's program, A Share of the Action, we'll take a closer look at power-sharing experiments in the Philippines where supporters of local autonomy, like Professor Alex Brillantes, believe that the role of the national government should focus less on political and economic control and more on empowering people at the local level.

PROFESSOR ALEX BRILLANTES:

I've talked to many local officials who say you know the problem with you in Manila is you continue to dominate us. Why don't you just leave us alone, give us our proper share and we will take care of where we'll spend it. You don't tell us to spend it on a shallow tube well, where, as a matter of fact what we need here are footpaths and footbridges. So, within this regime of autonomy we have seen increased excitement for the people to participate. We've seen increased excitement on the part of local governments to participate. And many local government officials who are now elected know that there in to work, not like before where they are elected and all they do is simply follow up the releases from Manila.

JOHN WESTLAND:

'Sharing Power' is produced by Sue Slamen with technical production by Ryan Egan.

Hope you can join me, John Westland, on Radio Australia next week.

