

Program 3: Independence and Nation Building

In most Pacific countries, the framework of independence was laid down by colonial powers as they lowered their flags of empire in the 1960s and 1970s. But did the parliamentary institutions established at independence reflect the aspirations of the people in the new states?

PEARSON VETUNA: Hello, this is 'Time to Talk'. I'm Pearson Vetuna.

Today in our series on governance issues in the Pacific we look at Independence and Nation Building.

A number of Pacific island countries achieved independence between 1962 and 1980, following the earlier wave of decolonisation in Africa and Asia.

For some, sovereignty was achieved as a result of internal pressures. For many, independence came in a hurry and with little preparation in a context of increasing international pressures against colonialism.

Some others reached various degrees of autonomy in association with their former colonial powers. And a few are still struggling for self determination.

Increasing pressures from Samoan nationalists saw Samoa become the first independent state in the region in 1962. Masiofo Laulu Fetaui Mata'afa, the wife of the first Prime Minister, has vivid memories of the day Samoa gained its political freedom.

MASIOFO LAULU FETAUI MATA'AFA: My husband lowered the New Zealand flag and a great moment came when the two heads of state came and they raised together the flag of freedom. And of course everyone cried, everyone wept while the voices of the students were singing.

NEW ZEALAND GOVERNOR: In bringing you greetings from the government and the people of New Zealand, I must say what a very great pleasure it is to be among you on this historic occasion. There can be no moment of greater significance in the life of a people than this - the attainment of nationhood.

MASIOFO LAULU FETAUI MATA'AFA: The speeches were starting after the raising of the flag and I could feel raindrops on my head and I said 'Oh God, please help us', and I look above my head. It was like a circle right above this spot and through it I could see the blue sky but the rest of it was dark. I believe that day only on that very spot it was fine, the rest of Samoa it was raining heavily. Anyway, it was such a happy occasion. I tell you, we achieved our independence so peacefully and so harmoniously and happily.

VETUNA: Samoan leaders saw the country's future in terms of continuity with the past - a future which maintained traditional structures. One of the main features of Samoan culture is its chiefly system - the Matai system.

Samoan historian Asofou So'o.

ASOFOU SO'O: It followed the Samoa cultural logic that there was no need to have another way of electing representatives to government, because they believe that the matais after all were elected by their respective families, it was democratic like any other democratic system, and they thought that it was proper that only the matais could vote and become Members of Parliament. This was confirmed in the 1960 Constitutional Convention, but the first official decision that matai be the only people to vote and become candidates was made in the 1954 Constitutional Convention.

MASIOFO LAULU FETAUI MATA'AFU: The Matai system is our anchor, it makes us very unique, it guarantees pride in yourself. If you are proud of your heritage, you don't do anything to harm that. So when we came to people who decide our future and rule us, there must be matai. So we're very blessed because within the Western democratic ideal, the matai system can operate quite happily and quite safely.

VETUNA: Masiofo Laulu Fetaui Mata'afa.

TOMASI VAKATORA: I think the time was coming to a head when the British Government has to give independence through the insistence of the United Nations.

VETUNA: Fiji became a sovereign state in 1970. Tomasi Vakatora was a member of the administration at that time.

TOMASI VAKATORA: In fact, if you look at the history, the Fijians did not want independence. They wanted to hang on to the British colonial rule for as long as they can live because this was a system where they looked up to. The Fijians have different leaders in different provinces so they look up to the British Government, to the Queen to be the unifying leader.

VETUNA: However Fiji's Indian community was by and large keen to see the end of colonial rule.

TOMASI VAKATORA: I think maybe through their hard background from India pitched up in the cane fields where maybe their European overseers or sirdars were a bit harsh on them, all this was built up inside them to try and reject the established order.

VETUNA: More than 30 years on, Tomasi Vakatora's hopes for unity and harmony are yet to be fulfilled.

TOMASI VAKATORA: I thought that Fiji's future lies in a country for all rather than giving one

particular community the dominance. Although the Indian communities were very dominant at that time and I think the Fijians were leaving it to the leaders. So with that in view, my own vision was to have a country where everybody can live in it peacefully and harmoniously, at the same time do not put the Fijians into a back stage so to speak.

ARCHIVES [Prime Minister Walter Lini]: Tude mi Walter Hayde Lini, mi kam Prime Minister blong Republic blong Vanuatu. Stret long pasin we konstitusin i telim long nem blong God, we em i gat olgeta pawa mi, mi promis strong long yupela baibai mi sanap strong long mekim olgeta wok blong ailan blong mi, baibai mi wok long olgeta man long Vanuatu long pasin wei i stret long olgeta, we baibai mi mekim i seim mak no moa long every man.

VETUNA: Vanuatu's first Prime Minister Father Walter Lini on Independence day in 1980.

Catholic Bishop Michel Visi says Christianity played a crucial role in the birth of Vanuatu as a nation.

BISHOP MICHEL VISI: As far as the life of the country is concerned and the strive for independence those who were the first leaders, national leaders of this country were pastors, priests, because at that time they were the people who were educated. And pastors and priests were there to do the planning and to prepare this country to independence.

VETUNA: For Vanuatu, known then as the Condominium of New Hebrides, the path to independence was not peaceful.

It was rocked by political unrest, fostered by the two colonial powers. While Britain was in favour of an orderly transition, France tried to block it.

The old saying 'divide and rule' was obvious in the northern island of Santo where France encouraged political groupings opposed to independence.

Kalmer Vocor, one of the first MP's for Santo wanted independence.

KALMER VOCOR: As man Santo at that time, I wanted to see the ni-Van[uatu] to have the opportunity to make their decision or to do what they can do especially in regard to business. You know when we were struggling for independence, we had one aim is to have the political power into our hands and decide how we want to run this country.

VETUNA: At the time Jean Delaveau, was in opposition with the Moderates in Santo. He felt independence was coming too early.

JEAN DELAVEAU: (in French) A lot of people say we were against independence but that's not true. We wanted independence but later. This independence in 1980 was too early.... We wanted autonomy first it just went too quick ...The country never recovered. We have nothing. The economy

is dead. We should have done like New Caledonia, they have 20 years now to prepare for it... that's good...

There'll be no sovereignty. We took our independence too early and we'll keep on depending on outsiders because we have nothing. Now we have to beg for what we need.

VETUNA: Despite French manoeuvres, the 1979 elections saw the landslide victory of the nationalists led by Father Lini.

ELECTORAL OFFICER [Archives]: For Chief Minister: Leymang 3; Abstentions 3; Lini 26. I declare that Father Walter Lini has been elected as new Chief Minister for the New Hebrides Government.

VETUNA: Claims of voting irregularities led to outbreaks of violence in Santo and in Tanna in the south.

Two months before Vanuatu's independence, Luganville, Santo's capital, was rocked by a rebellion led by secessionist leader Jimmy Steven. France and Britain failed to restore law and order. Troops from Papua New Guinea were called in to quash the resistance.

For many on the island, these events left painful memories. Kalmer Vocor again.

KALMER VOCOR: Well I think a lot of people still haven't forgotten how some of these military treated them and especially those who got some very harsh treatment. But we had no choice, we needed a military to come and help to get peace back to Luganville.

VETUNA: This is 'Time to Talk' on Radio Australia.

Today, Independence and Nation Building.

Solomon Islands gained independence from Britain in 1978. Sir Peter Kenilorea was the country's first Prime Minister.

SIR PETER KENILOREA: I brought the Solomon Islands into nationhood. It was not easy in the sense that building a nation of such a diverse small population of about, it was then 190,000 people speaking some 80 different languages, is a sign of the kind of differences and diversities we have here. And it was not easy to bring a sense of nationhood to them, especially the people who were out from the centre of government activities and the seat of the government. But then there was a sense of nation building. There was I suppose - I was going to say enemy, an obstacle - to that identity which was the colonial government, and so there was a sense of unity amongst our people to ensure that we get to that stage. I remember for example trying to discuss the independence Constitution in London, there were some difficulties in the colonial government's view about land ownership and citizenship. There were some comments amongst our constitutional delegation to the effect that "Oh,

let's have independence first, let's create a nation first before we deal with these other issues", because the creation of the nationhood was important in the minds of the people then.

RADIO ANNOUNCER [Archives]: It's a minute past midnight, now we have the Governor General Designate of Papua New Guinea, his Excellency Sir John Guise.

SIR JOHN GUISE: Distinguished guests, visitors from overseas, people of Papua New Guinea, Papua New Guinea is now independent, the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea under which all power rests with the people is now in effect. We have at this point in time broken with our colonial past and we now stand as an independent nation in our own right.

JACOB SIMET: There was a lot of talk about indigenisation of systems, of institutions. There was a lot of talk about the way the Africans had gone, the way we were supposed to be in the terms of the Melanesian way, the Pacific way. There was a lot of talk about how much of indigenous concepts, how much of indigenous ideas should be incorporated into the new system of government.

VETUNA: Dr. Jacob Simet from Papua New Guinea's National Cultural Commission.

JACOB SIMET: Culture was something which was presented as a symbol which was set up against colonialism. If there was anything to separate Papua New Guineans from Australians who were the colonisers at that time or even the rest of the world, it was culture.

VETUNA: Independence in 1975 gave birth to what is known as 'The Parliament of a Thousand Tribes'.

Papua New Guinea is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world with over 800 languages spoken among a population of just over two million at the time of independence. So how do people relate to this concept of nation?

MEL TOGOLO: I think you know culture - we think about our village first, then the area where we come from, then our province, and then we think about all the other provinces and therefore the nation.

VETUNA: Mel Togolo is Vice President of the Papua New Guinea Business Council.

MEL TOGOLO: Papua New Guineans are very close to their villages, you always hear them saying: "I'll go back to my village". Villages are foundation for many Papua New Guineans. And you see it here in many ways you know, someone dies here, you'll see all these wantoks, relatives all get together and organise airfares and send the body back to the village. We have to think about our village first, but that doesn't mean that we don't think about the nation. But it'd be very false to deny a Papua New Guinean person his sense of the village, his sense of the place.

VETUNA: Papua New Guineans have come together as one nation for a little over a quarter of a

century.

As for many other Pacific countries, nation building is work in progress.

MEL TOGOLO: Education, communication, exposure is opening Papua New Guineans to think about other Papua New Guineans, to think about their links. Exposure has introduced Papua New Guineans into marrying people from outside of their provinces, outside of their villages. So we are growing bigger, and I would like to see more of our leaders expressing policies in terms of national interests.

VETUNA: The newly independent states took on systems of government based on the Westminster model. This system had been operating for centuries in Britain and was handed down to countless former colonies at the time of independence.

But for the young nations of the Pacific how suitable was this model?

Bart Ulufa'alu was Prime Minister of Solomon Islands until his government was toppled during the ethnic crisis in 2000.

BART ULUFA'ALU: I doubt very much that the system we have inherited from the colonial government is suitable for the country and that it will sustain itself, because the system very much depends on the golden rule of divide and rule, and for an external power this is ideal. So the removal at the time of independence of that external force means there is a vacuum in the process of governance. And as a result people begin to ask why is it that we are one country united when we have diverse culture, we are geographically scattered, and cultural practices including the land tenure are quite different, and also the resource endowments of different islands are also different.

VETUNA: As for many other Pacific nations, the challenge for the Solomon Islands is to achieve unity out of cultural and ethnic diversity.

BART ULUFA'ALU: And no one knows what this diversity means and hence the need now is to identify the areas in which diversity has been recognised. And not only to recognise the diversity but to legitimise them through legislation so that these differences can be turned into benefits. Social strength for that unity and this is what is lacking all these years.

VETUNA: Bart Ulufa'alu, former Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands.

Next week in 'Time to Talk', we look at the role and structures of government.

MALE VOICE: Well the first time as a Bougainvillean in the Parliament, I'm living pretty good because it's my new time in the government, and I didn't know how government runs. But I spent two or two and a half years and I catch up very quickly.

VETUNA: Don't forget to check out our website at abc.net.au/timetotalk

I'm Pearson Vetuna. Bye for now.

Program Participants:

- Masiofo Laulu Fetaui Mata'afa, community leader in Samoa and wife of the first Samoan Prime Minister
- Asofou So'o, historian and Dean of Arts at the National University of Samoa in Apia
- Tomasi Vakatora, member of the 1995 Reeves Commission that reviewed Fiji's Constitution
- The late Father Walter Lini, Vanuatu's first Prime Minister after independence in 1980
- Bishop Michel Visi of Port Vila, Vanuatu is the first ni-Vanuatu Catholic bishop
- Kalmer Vocor, MP for Santo, Vanuatu during the rebellion in 1980
- Jean Delaveau, former member of the Mouvement Autonomiste des Nouvelles-Hebrides (MANH), Santo, Vanuatu
- Sir Peter Kenilorea, first Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands in 1978
- Sir John Guise, Papua New Guinea's first Governor General
- Dr. Jacob Simet, Director of the Papua New Guinea National Cultural Commission
- Mel Togolo, Vice President of the Papua New Guinea Business Council
- Bart Ulufa'alu, former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands

