

Delegation Report

**Australia to Papua New Guinea
18 to 23 April 1999****Hon Cheryl Davenport MLC****Introduction****Parliament and its relationship to Government****Foreign Relations****AusAID****(a) Infrastructure projects****(b) Health and Education Programs****Women and their role in PNG Society****Conclusion****Introduction**

The delegation was privileged to have the opportunity to visit a number of regions in Papua New Guinea (PNG) which facilitated understanding and insight into the culture and lifestyle of Australia's nearest neighbours.

It is now almost a quarter of a century since PNG gained independence from Australia but for the delegation it became clear that despite the close proximity of our two countries this mission was very much a learning experience for all of us.

The delegates came from diverse backgrounds, were from different Australian States and brought with them quite different political experiences. There were both gender and age balance which ensured lively debate and interesting observations. The group can be proud of how well it worked together.

It was of particular interest to the delegation, given the current Australian debate on the introduction of a GST, to find that a decision has been taken to introduce a VAT in Papua New Guinea from 1 July 1999. Discussions with the provincial administration in Mt Hagen identified concerns about local collections which must be forwarded to the National Government which would in turn provide grants back to the Provinces. Concerns were expressed about the lengthy process given that Provinces would no longer be able to charge local Sales Tax.

Parliament and its relationship to Government

It became very clear to the delegation through initial meetings in Port Moresby that there were significant concerns that the Parliament had not been in session since October 1998 and would not sit until July 1999. It was a commonly held view that a Vote of No Confidence in Prime Minister Skate would be moved and that the Vote would be carried when Parliament resumed.

This air of uncertainty in relation to the longevity and stability of the Government seemed to permeate throughout the community. The delegation was left in no doubt that the downturn in investment and mineral exploration was causing significant concern.

Briefings the delegation attended with the Committee Secretariat of the PNG Parliament indicated that MPs were experiencing significant frustration because the Executive Government was seen to be subsuming the role of the Parliament. There were currently 15 Standing Committees and four Special Committees but only three staff to provide service. The Estimates Committee had been unable to scrutinise the past three Government Budgets. A special Committee with a brief to advise on the establishment of an Independent Commission Against Corruption had been created but has been unable to report as the Parliament does not sit!

Currently being prepared by the Opposition is a Political Integrity Bill designed to force people wishing to change parties to resign from Parliament and face the electorate at a by-election. Apparently there are constant defections to other Political Parties which highlights the lack of stability in the system. For example, if you are elected Prime Minister the number of MPs in your Party increases dramatically.

The Committee Secretariat had recently been visited by Mr Cleaver Elliott, a Clerk in the Australian Parliament who facilitated a seminar for MPs and staff. A recommendation from the Seminar was the notion of placing PNG staff with Australian parliamentary committees, so they gain practical experience in the Westminster system of Parliament.

Foreign Relations

Discussions between the delegation and the Department of Foreign Affairs through Mr Alex Maino, Director General, Bilateral Division, were illuminating in that there remains a huge reliance on Australia for financial resources in relation to natural disasters, defence cooperation in management of the Torres Strait border, trade, and social aid devoted to health, education and infrastructure.

At a subsequent meeting with the Director General of the National Disaster and Emergency Services it was clear in the praise received that Australia is always the first to step in with money, human resources and other support in the event of natural disasters. (Eg. following the tsunami in July 1998 in which over 2000 people died and 8000 were made homeless it was Australia who was first to act and deliver.) Tidal waves, volcanoes, droughts and floods are frequently experienced.

Delegates asked questions of Foreign Affairs in relation to how PNG envisaged the impact of current unrest in Indonesia, particularly East Timor on Irian Jaya and itself. The only observation offered was that if East Timor became independent, a more aggressive stand by the people of Irian Jaya and others throughout the region may emerge.

The delegation was interested to visit a local village at Wewak where the Australian Army had recently participated in exercises. During the three weeks the Army was on site it had provided material and built a community hall for the local community.

AusAID

In the regional areas that the delegation visited it was interesting to find the provincial administration bureaucrats and officers thought the delegation was actually a group of people from AusAID come to inspect local projects.

Of course, the delegation was quick to advise Mt Hagen and Wewak Provincial Assembly personnel that it was not conducting inspections and had no official status in relation to aid projects. Our visit was simply a learning experience and all we could really do was to take note of concerns and feed those concerns back to AusAID and the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby.

(a) Infrastructure projects

There was no doubt that Australia's aid contribution is highly valued and in many cases virtually a lifeline for communities. For example, the bridge development programs just outside Mt Hagen were vital to enable swift transport for fresh produce such as fruit and vegetables to other regions in PNG. AusAID funding directed to establishing two-lane bridges, also provided jobs as well as upskilling for local people – it is important to note that Papua New Guineans were the only workers at both projects we visited.

The delegation was hopeful that such projects would assist in providing other than local markets for the only woman in PNG operating a pineapple plantation. Samples of the produce were quite an experience – the delegation wished such fresh, organically grown produce as the pineapples plus other fruit and vegetables were readily accessible on Australian markets!

In Wewak the delegation met with the Provincial Assembly and interacted with local bureaucrats, the Mayor and local councillors. A major concern raised on many occasions during the visit was the state of road surfaces throughout the province. The roads are built by a Korean Company contracted by AusAID. Road resurfacing with gravel costs approximately 300,000 kina about every three months due to the heavy equatorial rainfall. A suggestion from the local community was that it would only cost 600,000 kina to seal the roads with tar which could extend the life six or seven years – the delegation undertook to raise this information with AusAID for its consideration given the prospective economy of scale.

The Wewak meeting informed the delegation that the inferior road infrastructure was curtailing local ability to export produce to other areas domestically and overseas. Significant criticism of the National Government was encountered here about just how much of the aid funding may not be allocated to the provinces, consequently reducing resources available to upgrade infrastructure.

During both Provincial visits the delegation was asked to raise the prospect of AusAID funding being granted directly to Provincial Governments rather than through the National Government.

Subsequent conversations with Australian High Commission representatives made it clear that AusAID funding was directed Government to Government. However, we did undertake to raise the concerns.

In verbal evidence placed before the delegation it was very clear that primary produce exports which required internal and external investment such as vanilla

and rubber were being impeded due to the lack of, or inferior road infrastructure and inadequate harbour facilities.

(b) Health and Education Programs

The only access the delegation was afforded to health services was at Mt Hagen Hospital. Here there is an exchange program which has existed for a number of years with the Port Augusta Hospital in Australia. It serves as a training exchange facility for PNG health personnel as well as providing used hospital beds and other equipment.

There is enormous local pride in the hospital which is managed by a community Board. The hospital receives AusAID assistance to provide the health services and fund a Hospital Maintenance Improvement Programme. A substantial proportion of the hospital buildings were funded by the Japanese Government, but wards built in the 1960s and 1970s are still in use.

The delegation toured most of the hospital including the intensive care unit. This visit was a particularly sobering experience. In the separate medical wards accommodating both adults and children were cases of typhoid, malaria, hepatitis A, B and C, pneumonia and gastroenteritis. The surgical and trauma wards were overflowing with complex cases primarily caused by road accidents and domestic violence.

Of even more concern was the admission while touring the STD Clinic that every week an average of three people were diagnosed as HIV positive. The disease was said to be predominantly spread through heterosexual contact. Once diagnosed most sufferers lived no longer than two years.

Women generally gave birth at in their villages and only go to hospital for complications or other reproductive health treatment,

The Nursery contained several humidicribs where infants we saw were very tiny and stressed: it was clear on questioning that a number would not survive.

The Outpatient Clinic treats between two and three hundred patients per day: on average approximately 10,000 people per month are treated. It is a fee for service system and people must pay a minimum fee of two kina per visit.

Education services are also significant recipients of AusAID funding but the delegation had no official access to either public primary and secondary schools. An opportunity presented itself to access a local catholic school at Wewak when the Principal and head prefects emerged while we stopped to take photographs. The Principal led the delegation to the Library – a large room, but with a very limited range of books. Library staff surreptitiously slipped a note to a delegation member containing a message begging for books.

The delegation noted during the course of the visit that many young children were not at school during school hours. The explanation for this was that if their parents could not pay school fees, the children could not attend school.

Women and their role in PNG Society

It was a disappointment to the delegation that it met very few women active in the political and administrative systems within the country.

There are only two sitting women MPs in the National Parliament. We were privileged to meet Lady Carol Kidu (a former Australian who has made PNG her home since the early 1960s) who won a Port Moresby seat as an Independent at the last General Elections. The delegation spent a particularly lively and productive morning at a meeting chaired by Lady Kidu where Opposition MPs and staff members (amongst whom were a number of women who had contested parliamentary seats). This gathering solicited information from us on how women and young people were encouraged to participate in the political process in Australia.

Sadly during the Provincial visits women were even less visible in the day-to-day functioning of the country. Indeed the Delegation learned that polygamy is still practised and violence against women is prevalent.

Conclusion

After nearly a quarter of a century of Independence there continues to be many challenges for the people of our nearest neighbour. The significance of a stable parliamentary system is of critical importance in the quest for economic growth, fiscal stability, and social equity for its people and environmental protection for the land.

Australia's role in Papua New Guinea is changing substantially in that from Year 2000, economic assistance will be linked entirely to agreed aid assistance rather than the budgetary contributions of the past.

Members of this delegation felt privileged to have participated in this trip and found it educative and worthwhile.

The warm welcomes extended by our hosts across the country, along with the spectacular beauty and diversity of resource wealth have left delegates with high hopes for positive outcomes as Papua New Guinea continues to develop as a nation.

It is particularly appropriate to extend the delegation's warm and grateful thanks to Mr Roger Maginde and Mr Basil Kidu from the National Parliament and Ms Jane Millington-Tuan of the Australian High Commissions for the preparation of the itinerary and tour support provided during the visit.

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