

Pacific Futures, ed. Michael Powles. Pandanus Books, Australian National University, Canberra, (with financial assistance from the Pacific Cooperation Foundation of New Zealand), 2006. xiv + 260 pp, 250 x 176 mm, maps, tables, bib notes for each paper, index. ISBN 1-74076-187-1 (pb). AU\$34.95 (Int'l AU\$31.78).

This volume was conceived at a time when proposals and prognoses about the future of the Pacific Islands were appearing thick and fast. Amid intensifying pressure—especially from Australian and New Zealand governments—to confront mounting economic, security and political challenges, Pacific Islands Forum leaders, at their 2003 summit, endorsed the establishment of an Eminent Persons' Group 'to propose a fresh mandate and vision for the Pacific Islands Forum'. The Pacific-wide consultations and deliberations of this Group resulted in a report—adopted at a special Forum leaders' meeting in April 2004—which proposed the development of a Pacific Plan 'to create stronger and deeper links between sovereign countries of the region'.

In early 2004 Michael Powles (a retired New Zealand diplomat with longstanding links to the Pacific) put together his initial thoughts for a book project that would build on and contribute to this growing debate about the future of regional cooperation in the Pacific. As he explained in a later interview: 'I have always been aware that the connection between quality of life of individual Pacific Islanders and regional cooperation is not necessarily obvious . . . What was needed was more informed debate and discussion about the options for the Pacific's future. My hope was that, in the course of such a debate, the connection between the quality of life in the region and effective regional cooperation would be recognized by a growing number of people'.¹

In planning *Pacific Futures*, (which, during its gestation, was variously subtitled 'A new Pacific Community' and 'Towards a Pacific Community?') Powles conducted his own Pacific-wide consultation in order to engage as many 'Pacific island voices' as possible in the project. The result is a somewhat unusual compilation in that the vast majority of the 24 contributors (80 per cent) is from the Pacific Islands and/or lives and works in the region. Because Powles was not interested in producing a book 'just for academics', he also sought out contributors from a broad range of backgrounds. As well as academics, they include a high chief (and former Vice President and judge) from Fiji, an international jurist from Samoa, the Anglican Bishop of



Polynesia, a former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, a human rights activist from Fiji and an international lawyer from Solomon Islands. The book also includes a Foreword by the Prime Minister of Samoa.

It is therefore, perhaps, not surprising that bringing together this diverse mix of writers has resulted in a rather eclectic collection of essays and personal reflections. Moreover—as Powles himself admits—no one theme or approach emerges from this book: ‘too many different perspectives are represented for that’. Contributors were given a relatively open brief: to focus on the Pacific’s future, asking hard questions about conventional thinking; and to keep in mind the unique resource constraints of small island states.

The book is organised into four parts. The first, Political and Constitutional Challenges, includes a probing and rich analysis of the prospects for democracy in the Pacific by Teresia Teaiwa and Malakai Koloamatangi, drawing on democratisation efforts in Kiribati and Tonga. Other chapters consider the experience of governance in Samoan culture and the role of indigenous institutions (Lau Asofou So’o), the compatibility of traditional values and human rights with reference to the Fiji context (Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi), and the role of law in development (Blaise Kuemlangan). There is also an interesting overview and comparison of political systems and experiences in the Pacific by John Henderson.

The chapters in the second section, on Social and Economic Challenges, take a region-wide approach, and also start to address more pointedly the debates about future Pacific cooperation—if not integration. They include Wadan Narsey’s provocative dissection of the regional free trade agreements and Claire Slatter’s incisive critique of the neo-liberal economic ‘solutions’ imposed on the region. Other contributions include the prospects for a single currency in the Pacific by TK Jayaraman (in a word, ‘premature’), the case for allowing Pacific Islands workers access to labour markets in Pacific Rim countries by Satish Chand, and development assistance challenges by Vijay Naidu. Graham Sem provides a detailed overview of the impact of climate change in the Pacific region and responses to this challenge; and Galumalemana Afeleti Hunkin and Fepuleai Lasei John Mayer a sobering appraisal of the threats of language and culture loss in the Pacific.

The third part of the book is explicitly about regional cooperation and is titled ‘A Developing Pacific Community’. The essays in this section—by Richard Herr, Ron Crocombe, Greg Fry and Transform Aqorau—explore the foundations of regionalism and its various manifestations in the Pacific, and address questions of legitimacy and sovereignty. Greg Fry’s contribution, perhaps more than any other in the collection, reflects on the origins of the current debate about future regional cooperation. He

highlights the importance of security imperatives associated with the war on terror, which have largely underpinned Australia's new assertiveness in the region and the push for 'closer and deeper' cooperation. But Fry also exposes the tensions inherent in current proposals for a Pacific community. Whose vision of the Pacific do they represent? Where does Australia see itself in this regional project? Is regionalism about self-determination of Pacific societies or about hegemonic (and elite) control?

The final part of the book contains short personal reflections on the challenges facing the Pacific, under the heading 'Finding Pacific Solutions: Some Pacific Voices from Across the Generations'. The 'voices' in this section include those of Sir Mekere Morauta, Judge Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Rt Rev. Jabez Bryce, Hon. Robert Underwood, Gina Hounng Lee and Transform Aqorau. They reflect on Pacific community and identity, on the need for common solutions and for collective action in the face of global pressures and agendas, and on the power of vision.

As Powles states in the Introduction, this book pushes no particular line despite his own personal conviction that 'the Pacific must cooperate more closely' if it is to make its way successfully in the world. Rather the book is intended to provide background on the social, political, economic and cultural issues confronting the peoples of the region, and to offer different perspectives on how to move forward. There is no doubt that the book achieves these objectives. But the extent to which it will be a useful reference point, especially to those debating the future of the Pacific Plan, remains to be seen. A certain 'selectivity' about the issues covered reflects the choice of contributors rather than a deliberate mapping of the debate. What is likely to be of long-term value, however, is the refreshing diversity of views—and new thinking from the region—that these chapters contain. This may be seen to reflect and represent what Transform Aqorau termed in his chapter 'Rethinking sovereignty': 'the latest process of decolonization slowly taking place throughout the Pacific island states'.

Note

- ¹ 'Visions of the Pacific', *Pacific Connection*, Issue Eight, June–August 2006, p.13.
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