

## Australia (not) in the Pacific

Max Quanchi,  
University of the South Pacific

### Does history prove Australia is a Pacific Nation?

A map of the southern hemisphere shows Australia is a vast, arid continent with 22 million Australians squashed mostly into the south-eastern corner, while to the east and covering one-third of the Earth's surface, a few million Pacific Islanders occupy minute atolls or long chains of volcanic archipelago, and are spread thinly across Oceania. But it only takes a quick look at an airline route map with its red lines spraying out from eastern Australian capital cities, or the nightly weather reports on television, to see that the islands are close. 'Across the Coral Sea' is a catchy phrase, and relevant when considering that Brisbane is closer to Port Moresby, Honiara, Port Vila and Noumea — the capital of four foreign countries — than it is to Australia's southern capital cities. Australians have always had a good geographical sense of place — of being close to the South Seas as the islands were first known. The sense of being in, or close to, the Pacific originated in Sydney and Hobart's role as founding ports on the western edge of the Pacific and *entrepôt* in a global trade that linked the islands, Asia, Europe and the new Australasian colonies. This understanding of place was later expanded through travelogues, illustrated newspapers, lantern slides, postcards and exhibitions that were popular at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Sundays offered Australians a vicarious access as Missions and Churches raised funds using lantern slides and the pulpit for evangelical work in the Islands. Australia at times tried to create a sub-empire in the Pacific, and succeeded in 1919 in acquiring a Mandate and later Trusteeship responsibilities for Nauru and north-eastern New Guinea, two former German territories. Hoping to add to an existing colony in Papua, at times the Australian governments, visionaries and the Churches pushed hard for Great Britain to acquire the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) or to pass over control of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate to Australian control, and Fiji was in many respects a de facto Australian colony, dominated by Australian firms, banks and traders. After the Second World War, there was also discussion of adding Dutch New Guinea to Australian Papua and the United Nations Trusteeship in Northeast New Guinea, combining the three as one territory under Australian and United Nations control.

In the immediate post WWII years the Pacific islands were relegated to insignificance as Australia clung to its European ties and then pushed its involvement in global conflicts and alliances more towards Asia and the USA. In the 1980s, a political scientist, Greg Fry, summed up indifference towards the Pacific by coining the phrase that it was "falling off the map"<sup>2</sup> and in 2003, the columnist Graeme Dobell characterised Australia's policy as

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revised version of the historical sections (Chapters 1 and 5) in Samantha Rose, Max Quanchi and Clive Moore, *A National Strategy for Pacific Studies*, Brisbane: AAAPS 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Fry, "At the margin; the South Pacific and the changing world order", in *The post-cold war order; diagnoses and prognoses*, edited by JL Richardson and R Leaver, Sydney, Allen and Unwin 1993; Greg Fry, *Framing the Islands; knowledge and power in changing Australian images of the South Pacific*, Working Paper, Department of International Relations, Canberra, ANU 1996. Greg Fry, Associate Professor in Governance at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, has published dozens of monographs, essays and articles on Australian-Pacific relations.

dominated by ‘policy taboos, popular amnesia and political failure’.<sup>3</sup> Aid, trade, security and defence have been the relationships that dominated government discourse on the region since 1945, but three other “isms” capture the nature of the relationship – regionalism, tourism and volunteerism.

Beginning with plans laid as the Pacific War drew to a close; Australia promoted the idea of regional unity; an enlarged Western democratic alliance and Pacific Island bloc working together with a common purpose and common benefit for its own small territories and emerging nations. Australia led the formation of the South Pacific Commission (SPC), now the Secretariat for the Pacific Community, and a subsequent political arm, the South Pacific Conference, and since the 1980s, and supported a whole raft of regional organisations concerned with environment, fishing, shipping, education, science, communications, labour and trade. Australia has contributed to funding these organisations, played a crucial role in some, (and has been accused of dominating and interfering too much at other times) and continues to promote collaborative, regional development through the *Pacific Plan*, a response to the *Millennium Development Goals* that identified both the needs of the region, and strategies to implement change.

Tourism continues to be the most personal relationship. This began with the offering of cruises through the islands in the 1890s and took on new forms each decade as cruising, resorts, package-tours, jumbo-jets, back-packing, surfing and eco-tourism become popular to each new generation of Australians. These Australians claim to know the Pacific on the basis of a honeymoon, package trip, cruise or short resort holiday.

Volunteers on partially or fully funded appointments are also a significant form of linkage. There are official schemes but Australians also have eagerly and consistently demonstrated their sense of community with the islands by organising locally to build village health clinics, dig wells, arrange visiting medical teams, run workshops, raise funds and teach. Commonwealth parliamentarians in Canberra took their relationship a step further by creating informal PNG-Australia and Pacific-Australia Parliamentary Friendship Groups. Often these volunteer links developed after making personal contact during an earlier visit, usually a business trip, honeymoon or short holiday. Volunteers can be found in NGOs, religious bodies and AVI (formerly, Australian Volunteers Abroad), or in a host of other non-government agencies and organizations.

A welcome sign of change in Australia-Pacific relations occurred in Port Moresby in March 2008 when Australia’s new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, released in a joint press conference with Sir Michael Somare, then the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, a twenty-point statement now known as the “Port Moresby Declaration”. Kevin Rudd commented that:

*This Port Moresby Declaration and the Pacific development partnerships described in it go to two simple propositions. The first is for ourselves as Australia and the states of the South Pacific region. We need to ensure that our future development relationship is based on mutual respect, mutual partnership and mutual responsibility. That’s the first principle. The second is this; that when we look at the great challenges of development which face developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, we are mindful of the targets and goals which have been set by the*

---

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Dobell, 2003, 'The South Pacific—Policy Taboos, Popular Amnesia and Political Failure', *Quadrant*, May 2003, 16-23; other versions also published in *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 18, 1, May 2003, and in Ivan Molloy, ed, *The eye of the cyclone; issues in Pacific security*, Sippy Downs PIPSA/USC, 239-59.

*millennium development goals on education, on health and on other critical disease categories such as HIV-Aids and tuberculosis and malaria*

Kevin Rudd, Press Release, Port Moresby, 6 March 2008

A report on Pacific Studies in Australia released in 2009 argued that “Australians have a debt to honour, specifically to the Pacific Islanders once under our colonial control.”<sup>4</sup> In some parts of the region we have a deep and continuous relationship that now exceeds two hundred and twenty years. The report suggested, “We need to continue our humanitarian work in the region. We need to pre-empt and prepare for changes that will occur in the region, rather than responding with knee-jerk reactions and a fly-in, air-drop mentality towards emergencies as they arise. We need to move forward to a new level of understanding across the school and tertiary sector, and to create a critical mass of expertise on the region that will guide us towards a more neighbourly and rewarding relationship with the region”.<sup>5</sup> Australians generally, but specifically governments, agencies and institutions need to know more about their Pacific neighbours, especially considering Australia now spends one billion dollars a year in development assistance in the Pacific Islands and expects to have a commensurate level of political influence.

### **Looking back**

Until the Blue Mountains were crossed and pastoral opportunities absorbed capital development, it was the Pacific Islands that dominated the earliest economic and trading ventures in Australia. Sydney and Hobart were major Pacific ports. The Pacific was the lifeline over which supplies, more convicts and settlers, and trading opportunities arrived on the east coast. Ship-building, trading for pork in Tahiti, and sandalwood, beche-de-mer and pearl shell in Melanesia, procuring a variety of products for the Chinese market and whaling and sealing, sustained the new eastern seaboard colonies and created the capital and investment for future expansion. The Pacific Islands were well known, discussed and reported on so much that historian John Young coined the phrase the “Pacific Frontier” to summarise the Pacific’s importance in the early history of Australia up to the 1830s. The trade routes to and from Asia, through the Pacific, were integral to the development of the Australian east coast during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

By the ends of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Pacific had slipped from view with the exception of three important issues. Firstly, who was to establish colonial control of the un-claimed islands of the nearby Pacific? France, Russia, and Germany all loomed as security threats if they annexed nearby islands. During the 1870s, Queensland moved its border north through Torres Strait and almost to the coast of New Guinea. Australian became directly involved in the Pacific Islands when Queensland attempted to annex most of east New Guinea in 1883, and Britain finally acquiesced in 1884 and annexed British New Guinea (Southeast New Guinea), leaving the Northeast to the Germans. The Australasian colonies paid the cost of the administration of British New Guinea during the 1880s, and the Protectorate and later colony were partly administered from Queensland, with the Lieutenant-Governor in Port Moresby reporting to the Governor of Queensland. Secondly, who was to lead the evangelical movement as missionaries took Christianity to the Pacific Islands? Australian Churches and Mission societies later took over from the original metropolitan bodies much of the management of missionary activity in the islands, including fund-raising, training and supply.

---

<sup>4</sup> Samantha Rose, Max Quanchi and Clive Moore, *A national strategy*, 2009, p. 25

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25-26

Thirdly, who was to monopolise economic growth in terms of banking, shipping, mining, plantations and trading. The separate Australian colonies lobbied actively but without much effect to force Britain to create a British sphere of interest to Australia's east. Eventually Papua, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu (in a shared condominium with France), Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue, Kiribati and Tuvalu and Tonga all became 'British'. Australian firms, with serious competition from New Zealand firms, began to develop links with the islands; Burns Philp and Company (known as BPs), the Emperor Gold Mine in Fiji, trading firms like Kerr and Thompson in Suva, Australian banks and even the school curriculum from the colonies of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria spread to the islands. By 1900, when the colonies federated to form the single Commonwealth of Australia, Australians, Australian firms and Australian investors were major players in the region.

Between 1863 and 1904, Queensland also developed a human trade in indentured labour from what are now the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, the eastern archipelagos of Papua New Guinea and Kiribati and Tuvalu. An unsavoury and exploitative movement of labour, the trade brought around 50,000 individual Pacific Islanders to Queensland on 62,000 labour contracts, whose descendants created today's Australian South Sea Islander community.<sup>6</sup> The White Australia Policy that dominated Australian's attitudes to the rest of the world between the 1900s and the 1970s meant that during these years, Pacific Islanders were not welcome in Australia, and even Australian Papuans were seldom allowed to enter. Today, the presence of Pacific Islanders in Australia is rarely noted, and despite our long history of involvement, the region is only visible at times when the Pacific is a focus for the media, mostly to record coups, cyclones and disasters. Superficially, the Pacific is a popular setting for romantic and utopian lifestyle, reality and travel programs and museums, art galleries, archives and libraries in Australia have extensive Pacific collections and for a hundred years have held exhibitions of their Pacific material.<sup>7</sup>

### **1901-1939; Sub-Imperialism and good prospects**

Promises of profitable plantations, trading and individual prosperity in 'The Islands' and calls for an Australian sub-imperialism in the southwest Pacific resonated with newspaper readers who had already been teased with the incentive that New Guinea and Samoa before the war provided Germany with large supplies of copra (and profits). By the time Prime Minister William Hughes arrived in London in June 1916 to argue for Australia's expansion in the post-war realignment of colonial territories, the newspapers in Brisbane had already run news items on the prospects of ex-German colonies. In Melbourne, *The Age* voiced the opinion at the start of the war that "we have long realised that we have a Pacific destiny" and the post-war path could open up an Australian empire in the Pacific. James Burns, the head of BPs, argued in 1915, that the "natural destiny of the Pacific Islands is that they come under the control of Australia". In 1915, Burns went to London to argue the case for a post-war realignment including the possible transfer of the Gilbert (now Kiribati), Ellice

---

<sup>6</sup> Historian Clive Moore notes the Labour trade has one of the largest bibliographies in Australian History. See, Clive Moore, 1984, *Kanaka; a history of Melanesian Mackay*, Port Moresby, UPNG Press; Clive Moore, M Quanchi M and S Bennett, 1997, *Australian South Sea Islanders; a curriculum resource for secondary schools*, Brisbane, AusAID/Queensland Government; Doug Munro, 1995, "The labour trade in Melanesians to Queensland; a historiographic essay" in *Journal of Social History*, Vol 28 No 3; Doug Munro, 1994/5, "The Queensland labour trade", *Journal of Pacific Studies* 18, pp.105-36 (this special issue contains several essays on the Queensland Labour Trade)

<sup>7</sup> Susan Cochrane and Max Quanchi, eds, *Hunters, Collectors and Exhibitions; Oceanic collections in Australia*, Cambridge Scholars Press 2009.

(now Tuvalu), Tongan and Solomon Islands to Australian control. These arguments, with specific references to the administration of the Solomon Islands, were laid out in an anonymous series of articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1915 and a pamphlet titled *British Mismanagement in the Pacific No. 2*.

Hughes announced in 1916 in London that Australia favoured using the equator as a demarcation line, with Japan conceded control of the north and Australia the south. Hughes called it an “Australasian Monroe doctrine in the South Pacific”. The historian, Roger Thompson’s evaluation of Hughes’s campaigns in London and at the Versailles Treaty negotiations regarding the New Hebrides and former German colonies in Nauru, New Guinea and the Marshall and Caroline Islands, was that Hughes’s achievements were considerable for a small, semi-independent power. Hughes was reported to have said in London, “the voice of the colonies will be dead against the return of colonies to the Huns”, at the same time as diplomatically claiming that for Australia “it is safety not aggrandisement we are playing for”. On his return, Hughes claimed he had secured for Australia the islands which were “the ramparts of Australia’s security” as well as a valuable monopoly over the economic trade and resources of Nauru and German New Guinea.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from mandates over Nauru (jointly with New Zealand and Great Britain) and German New Guinea, Australia’s relationship with the rest of the Western Pacific remained as it had been before the war. The Governor-General in despatches to London noted it was a topic not much mentioned at public meetings in Australia. By 1920, the expansionist period was over. None of the predictions of Hughes and other expansionists came true. Australia gained New Guinea and a joint mandate (with Great Britain and New Zealand) over Nauru, but the Solomon Islands remained a British protectorate. In 1925, *Round Table*, a new forum and journal on imperial affairs, reviewed the first 20-year period of Australian administration in Papua and asked why plantations had not been profitable. The problems of inappropriate administration policies, falling commodity prices, world war, unavailability of labour and the “crowning horror” of the restrictive *Navigation Act* (Australia, 1912), suggested that Australia was not well equipped to administer Pacific territories.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, geographically Australia was part of the Pacific, and historically the Commonwealth of Australia was involved in the Pacific in labour, commerce, and trade in tropical produce, as well as colonial administration. But this relationship was not particularly caring or close, and it was unequal, paternalistic and sometimes racist, exacerbated by the size differences in land masses, economies and populations.

### **1939–1990: War, indifference, and neglect**

The Pacific War briefly dominated Australian perceptions of the region. Icons such as the ‘Coastwatchers’, the ‘Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels’, and the ‘Digger’ plodding up a muddy, twisting track on a sharp jungle ridge were easily recognised. There was little acknowledgement of the changes wrought by war on Pacific peoples. During the War Australia started proactively to plan for the post-war period, and the South Pacific Commission (established in 1947) was one of the outcomes as Australia planned to play a more assertive role in the region. Australia also lobbied successfully to create a single administration for the two parts of New Guinea it now controlled—Papua as a colony and

---

<sup>8</sup> See; Roger Thompson, 1980, *Australian imperialism in the Pacific*, Melbourne, MUP; Roger Thompson, 1998, *Australia and the Pacific Islands in the 20th Century*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishers.

New Guinea as a Trusteeship. Under Australian administration, thousands of *kiaps*, *didimen*, planters and government officials, teachers, health workers and missionaries and their families developed close relationships with Papuans and New Guineans and contributed to the country's development. The Australian children who grew up in New Guinea, along with the Papuans and New Guineans educated in Australia, created lasting trans-national personal ties.<sup>9</sup> Australia maintained its administrative control over Nauru (in a phosphate mining and trusteeship arrangement with New Zealand and Britain). Nearby the phosphate rich island of Banaba (Ocean Island) was also for all intents an Australian outpost. The Colonial Sugar refinery (CSR), a giant Australian firm, dominated Fiji's economy and politics, and elsewhere, Australians served as store-keepers, teachers, shipping agents and bankers or established tourist resorts and hotels.

But after the war, 'The Islands' slipped from the public consciousness. The winds of change that swept the region, ending colonial regimes and creating new micro-nations in Samoa, Cook Islands, Nauru, Tonga, Fiji and finally Papua New Guinea in 1975, were not well understood. Australia was attacked on the international stage for its tardy development approaches, colonialist stance and slowness to respond to decolonisation initiatives, and may be said to have reluctantly granted Nauru its independence in 1968, and then gave Papua New Guinea its independence too quickly — in a rush from 1972 to 1975. Australia supported, without vocally speaking out for independence, the next series of neighbouring independent nations — Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Tuvalu, but acquiesced to the Indonesia invasion and takeover in the 1960s of West Papua, the former Dutch colony. Then in a further reversal of policy in the 1980s, Australia actively supported indigenous *Kanak* independence in the French territory of New Caledonia.

The Pacific slipped further back from view as Asia became the new catchcry of the 1980s and Australia pushed Asian Studies in schools and universities, and international travel opened up Europe and Asia as a destination, eventually becoming far more popular than a trip to the Islands. In the period from 1970 to 2010, new dynamics were affecting relationships between the island nations themselves, between these new nations and their former colonial overlords and between the Pacific region and the rest of the world.

### **1990 - 2010; Intense, Uneven and lacking Direction**

By 1990, Australians were comfortably secure in a military alliance with a major world power, and actively seeking to develop a presence in Asia. A working relationship with smaller island neighbours in the Pacific was not a priority. By 2010, policy amnesia and certainty had been challenged by unexpected events in the region, three changes of government within Australia and a realisation that Australia was once again isolated in the antipodes and at best a middle order player in global politics.

By 1990, the Australian public was reasonably well-informed on global issues but the Pacific Islands were mostly peripheral in this era of rising global awareness. So, a strategic policy of limited engagement, secondary to maintaining diplomatic, trade, aid and cultural ties with Asian neighbours rather than the Pacific, seemed to offer, for both the Labour and Liberal/National Party Governments, a long term safeguard for Australia. Under the leadership of Prime Ministers Robert Hawke and Paul Keating, the Labour Government promoted trade links and Australia's membership of regional Pacific organizations. This policy was reversed by the Liberal/National Government led by Prime Minister John Howard that held power during 1996–2007, with the exception of two manipulative actions, using

---

<sup>9</sup> A list compiled by Hank Nelson of 160 books by 'New Guinea Hands', can be found in Samantha Rose, Max Quanchi and Clive Moore, *A national strategy*, 2009, pp.164-169

Papua New Guinea and Nauruan refugee camps to solve problems with illegal refugees out of Asia, and through the large scale of the RAMSI intervention in Solomon Islands.

These two decades had seen a crisis loom in our northern neighbours East Timor and West New Guinea (formerly known as Irian Jaya, and now Papua Barat and Papua Provinces). Australia stood by inactive while violence marred the vote on East Timor's future, and only became proactive under UN auspices as part of an international force that came too late to prevent the orchestrated violence against East Timor and its people. In Papua New Guinea there was a sequence of incidents; squabbles over the proposed *Sandline* mercenary solution in Bougainville, a breakdown in communication over the policing provisions of the new ECP (Enhanced Cooperation Program), the Julian Moti affair (allowing him to travel between Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands), Prime Minister Somare's shoes (after he was forced to remove them when passing through an Australian airport security checkpoint) and a failure to help solve the Bougainville civil war, made relations with Papua New Guinea uncertain and testy. Diplomatic stand-offs with Vanuatu over the role of Australian diplomats, and sanctions against Fiji after coups in 2000 and 2006, meant Australia's relations with the region were unstable. Military engagement in Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands were claimed by the government and the media as a great moral victory and demonstration of Australia's role as 'deputy sheriff' on behalf of the Western democratic alliance. The 2,300-strong military intervention force in the Solomon Islands in 2003 was led by Australia but only after Prime Minister Howard twice refused invitations to go to the Solomon Islands to help quell an emerging civil war and breakdown of government. The eventual intervention in Solomon Islands changed to a state-building, ten-year bureaucratic and administrative support program known by its acronym RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands).

In 1990, in regard to the Pacific Islands, Australia had seemed relatively well positioned. A Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs had been recently established and Trade, Foreign Affairs and other Ministers regularly visited the region. Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating attended the annual meetings of the Pacific Forum, the major meeting of heads of governments of independent Pacific nations. In 1992, Brisbane hosted the annual Pacific Forum meeting and throughout the 1990s, Australia continued its high level of aid to the region, including budget support for regional organizations such as the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC) based in Noumea and The University of the South Pacific. In 1996, the Government began to fund the *State Society and Governance in Melanesia* (SSGM) project at ANU to encourage scholarship on Melanesia and to assist in briefing and policy making. In 1998, the Government funded a short-lived *Centre for the Contemporary Pacific* at ANU and a new three-year seminar and publications program linking Australia and the region was also funded. In 2005, another Commonwealth funded program began to promote excellence in Asia-Pacific Studies began (known as ICEAPS), and this led to the creation of the *Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies* (AAAPS). In late 2007, policies were reconsidered again under the new Labour Government led by Kevin Rudd. A new position as Parliamentary Secretary for the Pacific Islands was created; although not a Ministerial or cabinet position, this was perceived as sign of a revived interest in the region. And, in March 2008, the Port Moresby Declaration, announced during a visit by Prime Minister Rudd to Papua New Guinea, signalled a new engagement with the Pacific Islands.

But by 2010, Australia's relationship with Pacific nations, bilaterally and multilaterally had started to crumble. Australian bureaucrats, politicians and journalists began to promote the idea that the Pacific was a basket case of unstable, corrupt economies (popularly known as the 'Doomsday Scenario'). Australia argued negatively and in a derogatory tone that island nations had little chance for real development unless they joined together as a bloc. The DFAT and AusAID rhetoric framed the island nations as remote,

weak, fragile and fragmented. This portrayal was rejected by Island leaders at the annual Pacific Forum meetings, a platform that became increasingly anti-Australian after the Australian Prime Minister John Howard stayed away from several meetings. Australia's position in the region became untenable when it was unable to intervene in any positive way to help its former colony, Papua New Guinea, bring closure to the civil war on Bougainville Island. This was particularly embarrassing when New Zealand brokered a series of treaty negotiations and Australia was at best a late arriving, third party. By 1999, Australian soldiers were in Bougainville as part of a peace keeping force, but this was not highlighted by either the government or the media, and was eventually overshadowed by the Australian military role in the East Timor INTERFET peace keeping force and RAMSI in the Solomon Islands.

During the 1980s and again in the 1990s, the relationship with the region had at times been decidedly sour. The Australian High Commissioner was expelled from Vanuatu for speaking out publicly on domestic matters, Australia bullied Pacific nations into appointing an Australian to head the main regional organization, Nauru won an out-of-court settlement over Australian responsibility for environmental damage from phosphate mining during Australia's UN Trusteeship period, and in 1987 Australia had to retreat from condemnation (and sanctions) of the Rabuka-led coups in Fiji, when other island nations offered their support for the indigenous cause in Fiji. In 2000, Australia's role in the region was further compromised by an inability to act decisively when a coup in support of indigenous Fijian interests was declared in Fiji to mask the criminal action of taking thirty members of Parliament hostage for 55 days. A few weeks later, when ethnic rivalry in the Solomon Islands led to the parliament being suspended and the capital city, Honiara, was captured by armed militia, Australia was reluctant to act, resorting only to the forced evacuation of all its nationals. In 1998, in Papua New Guinea, the secret use of mercenaries to bring a final solution to the conflict in Bougainville was exposed over Port Moresby radio and eventually Sir Julius Chan lost the Prime Ministership and his seat in Parliament. Australia had to sit back and watch these events unfold, offering only advice, several quickly arranged visits by Ministers and a visit by Chan to Australia for "consultation".

Good governance and nation-building have dominated foreign policy and development assistance discourse in Australia. This is the central problem. Pacific national boundaries were largely based on nineteenth century territorial divisions that were originally arbitrary dotted lines on maps, decided in London, Berlin or Paris. But fourteen nations are now spread across diverse archipelagos, incorporating many languages from an enormous variety of cultures, with no interest in or recent historical or cultural connections with Australia. Should Australia play the heavy hand and intervene directly in the domestic affairs of its newly emerging and at times struggling nations and neighbours? If it takes this course of action Australia risks censure, but if it sits back and plays the responsible international mediatory role, it is equally seen to be abrogating its neighbourly responsibilities to help those in need. What is the responsibility of the government to Australian taxpayers — should the government condone blatant misuse of aid, cooperation and loans if these prop up a small nation alleged to be poorly governed, in debt, corrupt and undemocratic? This balancing act has played out in post-2006 relations with the military dictatorship in Fiji, on the one hand pouring in \$300k plus in aid money annually to local networks and grassroots projects, while maintaining a diplomatic stand off and travel embargo. This uncertainty, and the related policy, strategic and diplomatic implications that follow, have reflecting badly on Australia as 'incidents' followed one after the other over the last twenty years. Australian governments have been unable to arrive at a long-term policy of mutually beneficial engagement with its neighbouring Pacific Islands region. A decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Australia continues to struggle to establish a positive, forward-looking policy of collaborative engagement with the

region. In the Pacific, the popular image remained of a wealthy, often friendly and generous neighbour but equally of a culturally-insensitive, indifferent regional bully.

4926 words.