



## Editor's introduction

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### Issues of institutional design in the Pacific Islands

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ISSUES OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN ARE MUCH DISCUSSED IN THE PACIFIC, although major systemic changes have proved rare. Unlike Africa, where colonially bequeathed institutions were often rapidly dismantled after independence, frequently in favour of presidential systems, the South Pacific Island states mostly retained Westminster-based parliamentary frameworks. Doing so generated a variety of concerns: did the government–opposition model or first-past-the-post electoral systems adequately cater to island ‘traditions of consensus’; did unitary systems satisfactorily handle ethnic or regional differences; and did the inherited legal and political frameworks enable equitable representation of women? Coups in Fiji (1987, 2000) and Solomon Islands (2000) also stimulated concern about the inherited political institutions: was use of separate reserved ‘Indian’ and ‘Fijian’ seats responsible for communal polarisation; would a shift to a federal system meet Guadalcanal’s demands for ‘state government’; and might alternatives to the ‘winner takes all’ majoritarian system permit greater accommodation between Fiji’s ethnic groups? Despite the rarity of systemic changes, efforts to find settlements to

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the major post-1980s conflicts in the region have entailed a reshaping of inherited institutions of governance, not only in Fiji and Solomon Islands, but also following the 1998 Noumea Accord in New Caledonia and with the advent of the Autonomous Government on Bougainville in 2004.

The papers in this collection were originally presented at the conference, 'Political Culture, Representation and Electoral Systems in the Pacific Islands', organised by the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Governance and Development (PIAS-DG, the University of the South Pacific) and the Institute of Policy Studies (Victoria University of Wellington), and held at the USP's Port Vila campus in Vanuatu in July 2004. Support from AusAid and the European Union for the conference is gratefully acknowledged. The event brought together leading experts on Pacific Islands politics, as well as government and donor representatives. Adding the focus on 'political culture' to the study of regional electoral systems was intended to encourage avoidance of oversimplistic electoral determinist accounts of Pacific political history. Including the focus on 'representation' was intended to focus attention on improving institutional design so as to give better expression to voter choices and to strengthen linkages between parliament and population.

The initially published papers from that conference, primarily concerning electoral systems issues, appeared in a special issue of *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (Fraenkel & Grofman 2005). The collection published here draws together a further set, focused on the broader institutional design issues –including the choice between presidential and parliamentary systems (papers by Robert Underwood, Glenn Petersen and John Henderson), issues of women's representation (Ian Scales and Josephine Taekeni), and the interface between 'imported' or 'western' democratic institutions and indigenous 'political culture' (Stephanie Lawson). It also includes two further electoral systems-related essays: Ron May's paper analysing ballot box data from Papua New Guinea's Angoram electorate to establish whether victors depended narrowly on clan support, and a paper by David Arms urging a proportional system for Fiji in place of the present alternative vote system.

Taken as a whole, the Port Vila conference generated a considerable contribution to the contemporary Pacific political science literature, including four separately published essays in addition to the two journal special issues

(Powell 2004; Rich 2006; Campbell 2005; Kaima 2004). The conference also raised a series of intriguing questions for further investigation. Subsequently, PIAS-DG has further pursued many of the conference themes, including establishing a database covering Pacific elections in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands, Marshall Islands and Nauru. This was used to inform a study of women's representation across the region, conducted on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum (Fraenkel 2006; Huffer 2006). Comparative research on electoral outcomes across the Pacific is also being undertaken, focusing in particular on rates of turnover of sitting members, winners' majorities and coalition formation and dissolution. It is hoped that in the future this work will assist the convening of future events such as that in Port Vila in 2004.

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