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FRAMING THE ISLANDS: KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN CHANGING AUSTRALIAN IMAGES OF ‘THE SOUTH PACIFIC’

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ABSTRACT

A new and powerful set of images of the South Pacific, and of Pacific islanders, has recently come to prominence within Australia. The images are embedded in a forthright salvationist message which warns of an approaching ‘doomsday’ or ‘nightmare’ unless Pacific islanders remake themselves—just as Australians have had to do. This ‘new doomsdayism’ forms part of a longstanding Australian practice of ‘framing’ Pacific island peoples in three senses: firstly, of drawing geographical boundaries around them for purposes of making generalisations; secondly, of intending to shape the lives of the people so bounded; and thirdly, in the colloquial sense, of setting them up for outcomes not of their making.

This paper explores how we should judge the exercise of power inherent in this latest Australian representation of the Pacific Islands; in particular, whether it marks a departure from the subordinating knowledge associated with the ‘smallness’ notion of the Cold War years. The paper argues that, while the new doomsdayism’s images of the region and of the potentialities of its inhabitants might at first sight appear to mark such a departure, the underlying preconceptions continue the subordination inherent in the development and security discourses of the Cold War era.
Framing the Islands: Knowledge and Power in Changing Australian Images of ‘the South Pacific’*

Greg Fry

A new and powerful set of images of the South Pacific, and of Pacific Islanders, has recently come to prominence within Australia. The images are embedded in a forthright salvationist message which describes a region in danger of ‘falling off the map’. It warns of an approaching ‘doomsday’ or ‘nightmare’ unless Pacific Islanders remake themselves—just as Australians have had to do. Such a remaking, it is asserted, will require sacrifice: a change in cultural practice, the taking of hard decisions and the changing of unsound behaviours. Yet, not only can the nightmare be avoided through right action, dreams can be realised. These ideas, of the kind more generally associated with millenarian movements or nineteenth century missionaries, are coming from a most unlikely quarter. This is not yet the imagery of Australian popular culture, which still holds to the idea of paradise, but that of the heartland of ‘rational’ thinking—the intersecting worlds of the bureaucrat, the politician, the foreign affairs journalist and the academic economist.

This new doomsdayism1 depicts a region which is failing to become part of the Pacific Century. In the dramatic imagery associated with this conception, the South Pacific is the ‘hole in the Asia Pacific dough-nut’ or ‘the eye in the Asia Pacific cyclone’. It draws attention to what is seen as a series of grim trends: a history of failure in development as measured by GDP growth; ‘soaring’ populations; unsustainable exploitation of resources; the marginalisation of island economies in a changing global trading order; and a ‘fatal farewell’ by old and powerful aid donors following the end of the Cold War. It asserts that the Pacific island countries

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1 I use the term ‘new doomsdayism’ to distinguish this from earlier doomsdayist depictions of the Pacific islands: by missionaries; by those concerned with what was seen as the dying out of the native races; and more recently by those drawing attention to the possible plight of some atolls if climate change predictions are true.
are on a path to a future nightmare of overcrowding, poverty, mass unemployment, serious environmental degradation, and a decline in health standards. The only hope to avoid this future, it is contended, is to open the island economies to the global market, effect structural change, jettison where necessary customary land tenure and inappropriate traditions, and connect with the dynamism of Asia.

Like earlier Australian depictions of the Pacific islands, the new doomsdayism provides an interesting sounding of the way in which Australians see themselves. At the centre of such conceptions has been an unquestioned, and often unacknowledged, belief that Australia has a right, or even a duty, to speak for the inhabitants of this region, to represent them to themselves and to others, to lead, and to manage them. This belief was asserted long before Australia had the power to enforce it, indeed even before Australia was formally established in 1901, a tendency which Bismarck labelled the Australasian Monroe Doctrine in the late nineteenth century and which its adherents saw as a form of ‘manifest destiny’ (Thompson 1980, 25, 224). Australian policy-makers continued to assert this belief over the next century, particularly at the end of the two world wars, and even more strongly from the mid 1970s when Australia saw itself as the natural leader of the post-colonial South Pacific (Fry 1991, 1992). Although a familiar tendency in white Australia’s approach to Aborigines (and the parallels are striking), the islands region has been the only area outside the continent where Australians have imagined themselves to be colonisers and civilisers.

But such images do not simply provide interesting insights into the Australian imagination; they affect the lives of the people they depict. It has mattered for Pacific islanders when, at various times over the past two hundred years, influential Australians have viewed them collectively as savages, noble savages, children, or full human beings, and whether the region was depicted as a defence shield, a frontier, vulnerable, empty, or unstable. Each of these lenses allowed or encouraged different Australian behaviour towards Pacific islanders: from colonial control and exploitation, to protection, development, and the encouragement of self-determination. While some of these agendas have been developmental and benevolently intended, and others dominative and exploitative, I contend that they all form part of a longstanding Australian practice of ‘framing’ Pacific island peoples.

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2 The most important expressions of the doomsdayist characterisation include Rowan Callick’s ‘Pacific 2010: A Doomsday Scenario?’ (Callick, 1993). See, in particular, R. Cole, ed., 1993 and Cole and Tambunlertchai, eds, 1993), the speeches and interviews of the Minister for Pacific Islands Affairs, The Hon. Gordon Bilney (see, especially, Bilney 1994a, b, and 1995); and Rowan Callick’s articles on these themes in the Australian Financial Review and Islands Business Pacific (see Callick, 1994a, b, c, d, e, and 1995).


4 See for example, Briscoe 1993 and Rowley 1972.
in three senses: first, of drawing geographical boundaries around them for purposes of making generalisations; second, of intending to shape the lives of the people so bounded; and third, in the colloquial sense, of setting them up for outcomes not of their making.

The doomsdayist conception appears to continue this practice. It is intended to transform Pacific societies and, given the context in which it is put forward, has the potential to significantly affect the parameters within which future possibilities are worked out. Australia is, after all, the largest aid donor to many island countries as well as the principal funder of the regional institutions.\(^5\) Moreover, the continuation of Australian aid has been explicitly linked to the adoption by island governments and regional institutions of the policies associated with this new depiction (Bilney 1994b, 5 and 1995, 8).\(^6\) The doomsday conception also has the authority of ‘knowledge’. It is not simply suggested as a possibility, but with certainty and confidence about ‘how it is’, on the basis of academic inquiry and the hard-headed realism and rationalism of the key areas of government and of the disciplinary focus of economics and demography. As Epeli Hau’ofa has reminded us, such authoritative depictions not only influence the behaviour of the powerful; they have also in the past impacted on the self-image of ‘subordinates’, whether they be the images of darkness prior to Christianity brought by the missionaries, images of inferiority captured, for example, in the term ‘boy’ to refer to an adult man, or to the image of ‘small is powerless’ promoted by social scientists, consultants, international agencies and metropolitan governments in the post-colonial period (Hau’ofa 1994, 149).

The proponents claim that the depiction, and policy recommendations flowing from it, have already been accepted by many of the key officials and politicians in the area and that it has provided the basis for a reshaping of the regional agenda ‘which marks a watershed in the evolution of regional cooperation’ (Bilney 1994b, 6 and Callick 1994b). Whether or not these claims are fully justified, it is certainly the case that the message has been welcomed by some prominent island economists and officials. Sir Mekere Morauta, (the then) governor of the Bank of Papua New Guinea, for example, stated at the launching of the Australian National University’s *Pacific 2010* project in June 1994 that ‘the doomsday scenario...is not surrealistic. The seeds and signs of that scenario have been planted in every Melanesian state, and are growing daily’ (Morauta 1994, 1). It has also provided the

\(^5\) In 1993–94 Australia gave $339m to Papua New Guinea, constituting 24 per cent of total Australian official development assistance. It also gave $126m to the other Pacific island countries (Fiji: $24m, Vanuatu: $16m, Solomon Islands: $14m, W. Samoa: $12m, Tonga: $11m, Kiribati: $7m, Nauru: $3m, other and regional: $37m. (*Australia’s Development Cooperation Program 1995 96* 1995, table 1.)

\(^6\) I explore the influence of the regional reform agenda promoted by Australia on the basis of the doomsdayist conception in Fry 1994, and 1996.
foundation for a number of regional initiatives through the South Pacific Forum. Its potential influence is also suggested by the rejection of its more extreme claims by several Pacific prime ministers including Sitiveni Rabuka, Geoffrey Henry, Paias Wingti and Solomon Mamaloni; by the President of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara; and by the rejection by the Japanese, South Korean and Malaysian governments, of the doomsdayists’ portrayal of their respective countries.\(^7\) The new depiction has also begun to influence the way in which the region is represented further afield. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, drew on the doomsday conception in its feature on ‘Heart of the Pacific Awash in Poverty’, reproduced in the *Honolulu Advertiser* (Wallace 1995).

I propose to consider the question of how we should judge the exercise of power inherent in this new Australian representation of the Pacific islands. Is it subordinating? Does it amount to a form of cultural imperialism or hegemony? Does it matter if it does? These questions can be given more definition by considering particular issues raised in Epeli Hau’ofa’s seminal essay, *Our Sea of Islands* (Hau’ofa, 1994). While he is concerned about the belittling tendency in past Western conceptions of Pacific island societies and the subordinating impact of this on the self-image of Pacific islanders, it is the more recent ‘smallness’ notion which is of particular interest for him because of its contemporary significance in shaping how the post-colonial Pacific was seen both by outsiders and those who lived there. The ‘smallness’ notion, he argued, underlay the social science understandings of Pacific reality which he had himself been promoting to young Pacific islanders as a teacher in the regional university. What distressed him was the disempowering effect of this conception: its determinism, he contended, perpetuated dependency and subordination. His central theme is the need to move beyond the belittlement associated with this dominant conception. He ends with a plea to Pacific islanders to never ‘allow anyone to belittle us again’. This suggests a more specific focus to our question about the new Australian representation: whether it would satisfy Hau’ofa’s concerns for knowledge which would move beyond the subordinating effect of the policy-related social sciences in the post-colonial period of the 1970s and 1980s.

\(^7\) For the rejection by the three prime ministers of the extremes of the doomsday scenario see Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Lateline program (1994); for Geoffrey Henry’s more extensive criticism see *Pacific Report*, August 15 1994, for Mamaloni’s criticism see O’Callaghan (1994b). For Ratu Mara’s scepticism about the doomsday depiction see Mara (1994, 3743). Mahathir’s objections are found in *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6, p.23 (‘Mahatir Hits back at Keating on Logging’); the Japanese Embassy’s publicised concerns are reported by Craig Skehan in Prime Minister Billy Hilly’s press conference at the South Pacific Forum, Brisbane, 2 August 1994, and the South Korean government’s objections are put in a statement to the South Pacific Conference, Noumea, 1995.
The proponents of the new doomsdayism claim that it does. Far from seeing their conception as inherently subordinating, they regard it as liberating. They assert that the adoption of their characterisation of Pacific reality and of their prescriptions to avoid doomsday will lead to ‘self-reliance’ and engender islander agency and responsibility rather than continuing the acceptance of the structural obstacles of smallness (Callick 1994e, 55). Its critics, by contrast, are portrayed as patronising and as seeking to keep Pacific islanders in subservience (Callick 1994b, 1994d). They also claim benevolent intent, as a defence against claims of hegemony, captured in the headline of Rowan Callick’s article defending the Australian campaign to make the new doomsdayism the basis of a new regional order: ‘How Mr Bilney, A Decent Man, Wants to Make Island Life Better’ (Callick 1994e).

A further strand, implicit throughout the doomsdayist writings and in the way the conception has been promoted, might be termed the ‘certain knowledge’ or ‘claim to truth’ defence. The new conception, and the policy changes based on it, have the status of ‘knowledge’ and the certainty of science. They are said to face the unpleasant facts. The need for a dramatic revision of our understanding of the region, its proponents assert, arises because there is a new reality in the islands region as a result of global changes following the end of the Cold War and the advent of a new trading regime (Bilney 1994a, and Callick 1993). Thus it becomes a duty to reveal this knowledge to those affected and to make it clear that, whether we like it or not, nothing short of full acceptance is acceptable if doomsday (predicted by science) is to be avoided. This, it is implied, is not belittlement but rather telling it how it is.

I propose to contest these claims. I will develop the proposition that, while superficially the new doomsdayism constitutes a departure from the belittlement associated with earlier Australian conceptions of the post-colonial South Pacific, in essence it is continued in the unacknowledged preconceptions upon which the new knowledge is built. For this reason I contend that the new conception does not meet Hau’ofa’s concern of moving beyond the subordinating knowledge associated with the ‘smallness’ notion of the Cold War years.

**The ethics of representation**

In thinking about the foundations on which we might make judgements about the exercise of power inherent in this new Australian representation of ‘the islands’, my theoretical point of departure is influenced by Edward Said’s (1978) classic study of Western conceptions of the Orient. Although he focuses on British, French and American representations of the Middle and Far East, Said’s ideas are relevant to other contexts in which peoples are grouped together and represented by outsiders who wish at the same time to manage, control, or prescribe for, the peoples they are depicting. Said is ultimately concerned with ‘how one can study other cultures and
peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective’ (Said 1978, 24, 328). The foundation of his ethics is a liberal humanism (Clifford 1988, 263–4). His judgements about Western knowledge of the Orient, or of any knowledge by one group about another, are based on whether it contributes to belittlement, to dehumanisation, to suppression of the diversity of human experience, and to an entrenchment of a subordinating relationship.

Said’s central thesis is that, in the case of Europeans and Americans depicting the Orient, this has never just been a harmless imagining about far-off places: it contributed to, and became part of, the structure of power. Said does not claim this hegemonic practice to be a particular vice of Westerners; nor, he contends, should it be seen as a practice which necessarily accompanies the generation of knowledge about other cultures (326–8). But, given Western dominance in world politics over the past several hundred years, he does see Western knowledge of the Orient as a primary site for understanding cultural imperialism in contemporary world politics. Said’s other major proposition about this knowledge is that the depictions tell us more about European self-identity and self-image than about any real Orient or Oriental. He argues that the Orient became the big ‘other’ in the European imagination against which Europeans defined themselves; an invention for Europeans reflecting their dominant ideas about themselves.

Said’s method for assessing whether knowledge practices might be regarded as inherently subordinating is to examine the unacknowledged epistemological premises, the subtle but powerful preconceptions which become part of the structure of power over another people through such things as images, construction of categories, and who is left in and out. He is particularly concerned with what he contends are two features of the orientalist knowledge system: first, the tendency to create a mythical collective identity—the Orient—and a mythical essentialised person—the Oriental—which it then becomes possible to characterise, and second, the tendency to consistently promote belittling, negative images of these identities. This knowledge has an impact on the people so depicted, he argues, not just because it informs and justifies colonial or neo-colonial practices through providing the lenses through which Europeans see the orient, but because it begins to be taken on as a self-image by those so depicted.

In adopting such an approach to judging contemporary Australian representations of the Pacific islands, however, I am mindful of several key issues raised by Said’s critics. The first is the trap of ‘occidentalism’ (see Clifford 1988, 271) which Said himself warns against (Said 1978, 328). While attempting to retrieve non-Western diversity and humanness from the impact of orientalists, Said’s approach encourages an image of an undifferentiated totality called ‘the west’—a reverse orientalism. This simply does not reflect the complexity of Western approaches to the non-Western world. As Nicholas Thomas so persuasively argues,
‘colonialism’s culture’, and by extension, we could argue, contemporary imperialism’s culture, was/is not only a plural society, varying over time and according to agent and location; there were/are also benevolently-intended colonial projects. These approaches were nevertheless hegemonic in promoting essentialist collective identities and, for Thomas, their (negative) impact can still be felt today in liberal discourses on indigenous peoples in their exclusion of the experiences of many indigenous people (Thomas 1994, 1–32).

A study of Australian conceptions of the islands could easily fall into the occidentalist trap, both in terms of assuming a homogeneous ‘Australia’ and in seeing its framing practices as necessarily concerned with domination. I attempt to avoid this trap by making clear that I am focusing only on certain sectors of Australian society: the media, the policy-related social sciences and the policymakers. While I am aware that there are different conceptions of the South Pacific at any one time within these policy-related sectors, it is a central premise of this argument that we can detect a dominant shared conceptualisation among them which quickly takes on the status of knowledge in a particular period. Thus, when I use the shorthand ‘Australian depiction’ I am referring to the characterisation of the South Pacific prevailing in these influential sectors. It is not to deny the possibility of contending and influential conceptualisations of the Pacific islands elsewhere in Australian society, for example, in corporations, churches, the humanities or popular culture. I also begin with the assumption that not all of these Australian depictions are intended to promote domination.

There is a related issue. The imaging of one group by another is not, of course, a process that is confined to Europeans, or more particularly in this context, to Australians, a point recognised by Said and Hau’ofa (1994, 149). In the Pacific context, Rarotongans have been known to characterise their compatriots from the northern Cooks in this way; Papuans to speak disparagingly of Chimbu; Polynesians of Melanesians; Solomon Islanders of the Gilbertese community in Honiara, or Fijians of Indo-Fijians or vice versa. Pacific islanders have also been known to hold images of ‘the European’—the palagi, the papalangi, dim dim or haole—which have sometimes been otherworldly, sometimes disparaging, sometimes ridiculing (Hereniko 1994, 411). The crucial question is whether such imaging occurs in a context of unequal power. Where it does—and many of these situations are not devoid of unequal power—I am assuming that ethical questions are raised concerning the contribution of knowledge practices to the dominance of one people over another.

A second issue raised by Said’s critics concerns his ambivalence on the question of whether a critique of orientalist practices implies that there is a true Orient which is missed by the distorting lens of European preconceptions. James Clifford argues that although Said in his Nietzschian and Foucauldian moments denies the
possibility of there being a true Orient, he nevertheless implies that there is when he seeks to demonstrate that orientalism misrepresents Arab peoples, Islamic societies or the non-West more generally (Clifford 1988, 260). This is an important issue and a difficulty which is constantly present in taking this approach to Australian conceptions of the South Pacific. In examining the certainty with which such conceptions are put forward I am proceeding on the assumption that what is interesting is not whether the knowledge-makers got it right, but the fact that they think there can be one true reality.

A third set of issues is raised by Aijaz Ahmad who begins from a more antagonistic position to Said’s overall project. He argues that Said and his followers are involved in romanticism, a form of Third Worldism in which disaffected intellectuals in the diaspora construct a new subjugation of the East by the West, one which masks their own complicity in the exploitative and ruthless relations within Third World states and their own positions as privileged people. Following this line, the critique of Western representations of the non-European world becomes a new form of dependency theory, an attempt to place the blame for wrongs firmly on the outside world rather than to sheet responsibility home to local élites (Ahmad 1994, 165–7). In the South Pacific context, this takes the form of a contention that to critique the new Australian depiction, which reveals corruption and mismanagement, is to protect local scoundrels. I proceed on the assumption that this does not necessarily follow. This is, nevertheless, a powerful critique which at the very least should alert us to shifting responsibility totally from indigenous élites to Western cultural imperialism. At the same time, to fully adopt Ahmad’s perspective is to lose sight of outside knowledge as an important influence of the parameters within which these societies make choices.

Drawing on Said’s general approach, I propose to explore four epistemological premises underlying contemporary Australian representations of the South Pacific. These will form the bases for judgement as to whether these representations are potentially subordinating. The first is the degree to which a mythical Pacific island person and society is created, and diversity suppressed. To presume the existence of something called ‘the South Pacific’ need not necessarily lead to stereotyping of the peoples and societies within it. The extraordinary diversity—of cultural and linguistic forms, of resource endowments and geographical features, and colonial experience—has been, after all, a major attraction for many of those calling themselves Pacific scholars. In such an approach, the region becomes a handy comparative frame as long as the basis of its construction is remembered. It is rather, then, the move concerned with personifying the South Pacific, and the accompanying tendencies to create a mythical Pacific island state, person and society, which in its suppression of diversity raises important issues. If the knowledge it is built upon bears little resemblance to the experience of any society, this has implications for the claim to truth. If it proceeds on the basis of
generalising from one or two known experiences it also excludes the experiences of others who do not fit the stereotype. Furthermore, it introduces essentialism. As soon as characteristics are attributed to these mythical categories, this knowledge not only produces the deduction that any particular Pacific islander has these characteristics, but that he/she has so because he/she is an ‘islander’.

The second premise concerns the way in which Pacific islanders and their societies are imaged. To what degree are such depictions consistently dehumanising and belittling? The denial of humanity implicit in the folding of all Pacific island persons into one identity, and the attribution of an essentialist character to that identity, is magnified if that depiction is consistently disparaging, or belittling. Imagery can set people up for particular outcomes not of their making and yet may be unacknowledged and unquestioned by those employing it. It becomes the handy summary about a place or people which becomes the unexamined starting point for policy-makers. Said built his case against orientalism largely by showing the consistently negative imagery applied to the Orient, imagery which reinforced the idea of a superior Europe and an inferior Orient and denied the normal range of human character and abilities. This was seen by many critics as ignoring the many scholars of the Orient who did not indulge in racist or other types of imagery enforcing a superior/inferior divide. I am persuaded by those who, while sympathetic to the issues that Said raises, are starting from the premise that the West, like the Orient, is a more complex place. I therefore pose the question in an open-ended way: to what extent does the imagery associated with the new doomsdayism reinforce an implicit subordination of Pacific island peoples?

A third line of inquiry focuses on the relationship that the framers of the knowledge define between themselves and the frame. In particular, the construction of a division between a superior ‘us’ and an inferior ‘them’ is accentuated by the degree to which there is a denial of shared humanity on the part of the framer, in the sense of a preparedness of placing its own experience and problems up for depiction alongside the others about which it is constructing knowledge. This has a particular expression in the case of Australians depicting the South Pacific because of the geographical location of Australia in relation to the region it is characterising: whether or not they place Australia within the boundaries of ‘the South Pacific’.

Finally, I propose to consider preconceptions concerning certainty of knowledge, and the claims of science. There is the question of the extent to which Australian representations claim to provide the one true reality of Pacific island experience rather than a perspective built on particular epistemological and ideological preconceptions. Before exploring these unacknowledged preconceptions embedded in the new doomsdayism, we need first to acquaint ourselves with the origins and development of the conception, its main tenets and normative underpinnings.
The doomsday depiction

The doomsday image was initially sketched in 1993 by Rowan Callick, a prominent economics journalist and Pacific commentator who was asked by the Australian National University’s Pacific 2010 project to draw a word-picture of the South Pacific fifteen years out, based on the projections of the Pacific 2010 researchers (Callick, 1993). In summary form, as it appears on the cover of the first Pacific 2010 publication, the ‘doomsday scenario’, said to arrive by 2010, is:

...population growth in the Pacific islands is careering beyond control: it has doubled to 9 million; malnutrition is spreading and is already endemic in squatter settlements...there are beggars on the streets of every South Pacific town...levels of unemployment are high...expenditure on education has tripled, although there are still no government welfare payments...deaths from AIDS, heart disease and cancers have greatly increased, government services have been privatized or in many cases have lapsed...aid donors have turned their attention elsewhere...crime has increased...trade in narcotics, marijuana, kava and betel nut has produced its first island millionaires...pollution and land degradation has spiralled...much of the surviving rainforest has been logged...coastal fisheries have been placed under threat from over fishing...skills shortages in the labour market yawn wide...(Cole 1993).

While it is the image of a future nightmare which captures our attention, Callick also paints a graphic picture of the contemporary South Pacific on its way to this future. He describes the ‘grim trends’ which are the ‘signs and seeds’ of the doomsday scenario: population growth ‘careering...out of control’, the lack of structural adjustment in island economies in the face of a changing economic and strategic order, and serious environmental problems. The image is of an islands region not facing up to its responsibilities at a time when outside interest in the Pacific islands is waning and the impact is being felt of ‘the frenetic globalization of economic life’. Callick does not, however, see the doomsday scenario as inevitable if Pacific leaders take urgent action ‘before looming disasters impose their own grim patterns’ and ‘the nightmare becomes reality’. The ‘essential joint ingredients for solutions to the South Pacific nightmare’, he claims, lie in economic restructuring and appropriate population policies and ‘an active strategy on the environment’. The focus, however, is on structural adjustment:

The required reforms may best be delivered together, for presentation purposes, as a single package. They may ultimately involve tighter budgetary discipline, measures to enhance competitiveness, corporatization and privatization, reform of the financial sector, adjustment of exchange rates, alteration of the way wages are determined and reorganization of government priorities so that a greater proportion of the budget is spent on education, health and infrastructure.
...The success stories, economically and politically, will be those emphasizing openness and links—trade, investment, even the movement of skilled workers, foreigners and nationals, in and out of the country—rather than those emphasizing a defiant independence.

A greater focus within the region on free trade would help to frame the right mentality (Callick 1993, 10–11).

The Pacific 2010 project, of which this was a part, was financed by the government’s aid delivery body, the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (later called AusAID). Its purpose was to set before Pacific leaders the research findings on the major trends in their societies and the implications for policy to the year 2010. The project has had a high profile. It was launched at Parliament House by the Minister, and its various studies have been widely disseminated in the region. The new conception had been raised to a high rung of influence when its themes were taken up by the Minister for Pacific Islands Affairs, the Hon. Gordon Bilney, in his address to the Foreign Correspondents Association in Sydney in June 1994 (Bilney 1994a). Broadcast by satellite to Pacific island representatives assembled in island capitals, the speech was intended as a landmark statement setting out the broad assumptions of future Australian policy towards the region. It focused on what the Minister regarded as ‘a number of key factors which must be addressed by island governments with a sense of urgency if sustainable development is to be achieved in the South Pacific’. Despite the Minister’s claim that he was not seeking ‘to paint a picture of a region in a state of crisis’, he gave the impression that such a crisis was imminent unless urgent action was taken along the lines he sketched. The air of impending doom was given further embellishment in the newspaper headlines: ‘Visions of Paradise Blur as South Pacific Sails Off The Map’ (Wright 1994); ‘Pacific Islands Face Nightmare Without Change, Says Bilney’ (Gill 1994); ‘Pacific Islands Face Nightmare Future’ (Perry 1994); ‘South Pacific Policies Not Working: Bilney’ (O’Callaghan 1994a); and ‘Paradise Lost in the South Pacific’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 20 June 1994).

Later in the year, Australia’s Prime Minister Keating and Minister Bilney vigorously promoted the new conception as the underlying rationale for a new regional economic order at the South Pacific Forum in Brisbane (Fry 1994). The resultant reform agenda focused on rationalisation of the regional airlines, public sector management, and the issues of sustainability and returns in the timber and fisheries sectors. The media again took up the themes of a failed region heading towards a grim future, most influentially perhaps in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Lateline TV program, ‘Pacific Nightmare’, in which three Pacific prime ministers were questioned on what they were doing about this new Pacific ‘reality’ following an introduction featuring Callick’s doomsday scenario (ABC Lateline 1994). If anything, the Australian government’s resolve to promote these
ideas strengthened in 1995. They were expressed multilaterally in the efforts to implement some of the regimes and other decisions resulting from the Brisbane Forum in such areas as civil aviation rationalisation, public sector finance, sustainable forestry and fisheries management, as well as in attempts to take the reform agenda further at the Madang Forum in September. They were also expressed in the intense campaign to have an Australian gain the Secretary-General position in the South Pacific Commission, thereby reversing a long established convention that the post be filled by a Pacific islander (Fry 1996).

What had emerged by 1995 was a shared depiction in key areas of academia, government and media about the South Pacific and its future. This shared conviction was not due simply to the common appeal of some persuasive ideas. These were not entirely watertight sectors of Australian society. Importantly, Rowan Callick, a key maker of the images of the new doomsdayism, and its strongest and most consistent defender, had a significant role in each sector: as part of the Pacific 2010 academic project, as a member of the Minister’s aid advisory council and as the main interpretative media commentator, both in the most influential financial newspaper within Australia, and in the main monthly reaching island elites. Callick was not simply acting as a scribe drawing out the implications of the Pacific 2010 research. It is evident from his other articles, before and after the Pacific 2010 chapter, that he was a major independent force in developing the new doomsdayism conceptually and presentationally. It also mattered that the Pacific 2010 academic project was AusAID-financed in terms of the authority given its findings in the Minister’s approach and in the publicity given to its findings.

The new doomsdayism is as much a picture of the contemporary South Pacific as it is of a possible future scenario. This picture can usefully be considered as comprising three constitutive images. The first is that of the failed region. Here, the picture is one of an economically stagnant region. It draws its intellectual authority from the World Bank’s recent assessments of the South Pacific condition, and particularly from its notion of ‘the Pacific paradox’ (World Bank 1993, ix, 1). As described by the Minister, the paradox is ‘that, over the past decade most Pacific island countries have achieved only slow growth in real per capita incomes despite a generally favourable natural and human resource endowment, high levels of external assistance and generally sound economic management’ (Bilney 1994a, 5). He goes on to claim that the World Bank’s 1993 report estimated that ‘real gross national product in Pacific island countries grew by an average rate of only about 0.1% annually over the previous ten years’. (The Bank’s actual figure was 2.1%. The 0.1% figure referred to GDP per capita). Again following the World Bank, the comparative ‘success’ in growth terms of other island countries in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean is also introduced as evidence of South Pacific failure.
The emphasis on economic growth is tempered, however, by a concern with sustainability. The doomsdayists, like the World Bank, present a picture of failure on this score, particularly in the forestry and fisheries sectors. In the case of timber, attention is drawn to ‘the pressing risk of blanket destruction’ of ‘the region’s rare and diverse forests’ due to ‘rapacious exploitation for profit by unscrupulous foreign operators’ (Bilney 1994b, 12) and the connivance on the part of corrupt politicians in these activities. Again echoing the Bank’s broadened interests in recent years, the doomsdayist depiction also presents a picture of serious environmental degradation. The Minister, for example, listed a catalogue of environmental problems that he feels the region needs to face up to: ‘deforestation, coastal pollution and degradation, depletion of inshore fisheries and damage to coral reefs, inadequate watershed management, a shortage of clean drinking water and effective waste management facilities, all underpinned as it were by the possible effects of global climate change’ (Bilney 1994a, 8). It is also contended that in the case of tuna, there has been a failure to obtain sufficient return, particularly from Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

Other areas of failure contributing to the poor overall economic performance, it is argued, include an inefficient and bloated public sector, ‘stop-gap measures’ and ‘haphazard and uncoordinated development efforts’, corrupt leadership, inefficient regional structures, ‘extravagant national symbols’ (Bilney 1994a, 14) and, in particular, inefficient and costly national airlines whose combined losses in 1994, it was claimed, totalled more than Australian aid to the South Pacific in the same year.

Although the traditional constraints operating on small island states are recognised in passing, the explanation for failure is put more in terms of inappropriate policy frameworks and cultural practices, and an inflexible customary land tenure (Bilney 1994a, 6,13). While the 1994 formulations emphasise inappropriate policy frameworks as the problem, and island economic management, following the World Bank report, is judged to be ‘generally sound’ (Bilney 1994a, 5), a few months later Bilney was describing island management as ‘muddling-through’ and was arguing that:

The overall record of economic management and performance is poor and the Pacific tendency towards pragmatism and the Australian equivalent of ‘she’ll be right mate’ mentality, cannot mask these problems indefinitely (Bilney 1994b, 3).

Callick also shifted from a focus on inappropriate policies to a failure in leadership. He began to point to specific shared characteristics of island leaders:

...island leaders have a tradition of agreeing, then doing the opposite, or more likely, nothing...And even minor multilateral progress leads to more,
practically, than local measures—more prone to backflips, inaction and sheer bribery (Callick 1995).

This had become a failure born of the essential nature of Pacific islanders rather than inappropriate frameworks, a departure from the World Bank picture.

A second image is that of a region whose population is ‘soaring’ (Costello 1995, 8). On the basis of the projections of the Pacific 2010 demographers, Callick suggests a near doubling of the population of ‘the islands’ (leaving aside the French territories and Micronesia) to nine million. And of the situation as he writes, he claims, again on the basis of Pacific 2010 research, that ‘the region’s [my emphasis] population growth is careering, albeit happily for now, out of control’ (Callick 1993, 2, 8). Professor Ron Duncan, the Director of the National Centre for Development Studies (the source of Pacific 2010) is reported as saying that ‘the Pacific islands are at a stage where population growth means that their standard of living has fallen below what it was in the 1980s’ (Wallace 1995, A7). This Malthusian picture was also a central aspect of Bilney’s depiction of the region (Bilney 1994a, 9).

The third image is that of the marginalised region (Bilney 1994a, 4) or, as put more graphically by some, that of a region which is ‘falling off the map’ (Wright 1994, ABC 1994, 3). There are several propositions underlying this picture. The starting point is the claim that, following the end of the Cold War, great power interest is waning or will wane. This is a tendency referred to by Rowan Callick as ‘the fatal farewell’ to indicate that just as the coming of the colonial powers in the nineteenth century might be described as a ‘fatal impact’, their departure is causing fatal consequences of its own kind (Callick 1994e, 55). He has in mind the departure of the economic assistance, trade concessions and investment that, he contends, kept the island countries afloat during the Cold War. In support of his claim he cites the closing down of the US AID offices in the South Pacific, British withdrawal from the South Pacific Commission and the end of Russian involvement in the region. This, it is argued, creates a very different situation in which island states can no longer rely on external subsidies to make up for their own inefficiencies.

The picture of a marginalised region also draws on a contention concerning the implications of a changing global trading regime following the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. It is argued that the island economies will fall increasingly behind in a liberalised trading order unless they make the necessary reforms. A pertinent example of such marginalisation is given in the erosion of the value of trade preferences for island countries under the SPARTECA trading arrangement with Australia. There is also the claim of marginalisation within the dynamic Asia–Pacific economy, represented as resulting from a failure to make appropriate domestic adjustments to ‘capitalise on these new trade openings’ and also as a failure ‘to make the necessary connections with the larger nations of the Asia–Pacific rim’ (Bilney 1995, 9).
We have seen that Callick, in his original statement of the doomsday scenario, sees the answer to this post-Cold War vulnerability in the application of Australia’s domestic reform strategy writ large; in particular, public sector reform and private sector development in an open economy. The Minister goes a little further suggesting that island leaders may need to consider the appropriateness of maintaining ‘extravagant national symbols’ such as airlines, of traditional land use patterns where they are incompatible with the needs of investors, and of sheltering behind a ‘fortress of tradition’ (Bilney 1994a, 13 14; 1995, 10). ‘Island countries’, Bilney argues, ‘may need to ask themselves, as Australians have had to do in recent years, whether some old social and economic habits and attitudes might need to be adapted or even abandoned’ (1994, 7). Callick also sees cultural change as crucial:

This [the South Pacific ‘standing on its own two feet’] means, above all, accelerating the conceptual shift on the part of the region’s decision makers, from a traditional emphasis on the importance of distribution of wealth...to an emphasis on production (Callick 1993,7).

This element of social change can also be seen in Callick’s suggested solution to the perceived population problem: it ‘entails, above all, convincing islanders that their country’s economic future is bright, and they will not need to rely on a large number of children as their only route to long-term security’ (Callick 1993, 8). At heart this conception is informed by the neo-classical model of development. This was not a new emphasis for the National Centre for Development Studies, which since 1987 had been the most influential academic voice attempting to move the conceptualisation of Pacific island development away from the assumptions of ‘smallness’ and towards World Bank thinking. What was new was the dramatic imagery and the air of crisis about what would happen if structural adjustment were not implemented.

The new depiction of the South Pacific has been accompanied by ambivalent images of ‘Asia’ and ‘Asians’. On the one hand, as we have seen, Asia is seen as the source of dynamism with which the islands must engage and as a model of success. On the other, the doomsdayists promote a very strong image of Asians as predators, as unruly capitalists and exploiters, to be controlled and guarded against. The critique of Malaysian logging firms shades into a critique of the Malaysian government; and of Japanese and Korean tuna boats into an attack on the Japanese and Korean governments, and in some accounts, all of this becomes unwanted ‘Asian’ involvement, to be warned against. During the Brisbane Forum, for example, Prime Minister Keating was reported as having ‘attacked Malaysian, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean companies for their rampant exploitation of the South Pacific forests and fisheries’ (O’Callaghan 1994b, c) and Callick referred to ‘the Asian fleets plundering the resource for tiny bilateral licences’ (my emphasis, 1994c). ‘Asia’ is presented as providing both threat and opportunity. Despite
Callick’s call for open economies that will connect with Asian capitalism, for example, he views the first significant evidence of such a connection as one of the major ‘headaches’ for Minister Bilney. He describes the headache as ‘our new Asian chums are starting to rampage through the region’s resources in a freebooting style similar to that of the European pirates of a century ago’ (Callick 1994a). He also makes Asian involvement in the region part of his ‘nightmare’ scenario for the year 2010:

The region’s increasingly close integration into East Asia has led to a change in diet, with more spices now used in cooking, and to a greater number of Asian workers arriving. Some artisans stay on after being engaged on aid projects. Mosques are now found in almost every island capital (Callick 1993, 5).

The negative depiction of Asia is accentuated by a curious silence in the doomsdayist depiction. In all the talk of resource depletion, environmental degradation and corruption there is no mention of the largest involvement of outside capital in Pacific resources, that of Australian company investment in mining.

The proponents of the doomsdayist characterisation claim this to be a significant departure from the dominant Australian depiction of the South Pacific during the Cold War years in several ways: it is focused on the economy rather than on security; and sees the developmental answers in outward-looking strategies rather than the inward-looking policies of the past. It sees itself as moving beyond the idea that ‘small is powerless’, that island states are a victim of the world system, and that they constitute a unique case. Under this characterisation all island states can achieve good growth figures; it is just a matter of employing the right policy settings. The task the Australian government has set itself, according to Callick (1995), is ‘to transform the old post-colonial focus on equity into one of governance’. Callick also argues that the new conditions necessarily involve the jettisoning of ‘old concepts of sovereignty’ (1994d). By contrast with earlier conceptions, the South Pacific referred to is the independent Pacific only; that is, the fourteen island member countries of the South Pacific Forum.

At a general level, the normative concerns underlying the depiction—‘sustainable development’, ‘making island life better’, ‘good governance’, ‘self-reliance’, and an ‘end to mendicancy’—are all goals that in one form or another have been espoused by all sides of the development debate in the South Pacific. And many of the problems described—corruption, deforestation, pollution, population pressures, employment, and obtaining a decent return on the fisheries—are issues of concern to most participants in the debate. Where the differences emerge is in relation to how these participants characterise the contemporary situation and how they see Pacific societies proceeding from that situation to these desired ends. But
rather than exploring the critique that these other development perspectives might offer in regard to the explicit tenets of the new doomsdayism, I propose now to develop a critique at the level of preconception, or unquestioned assumption.

**Framing and diversity**

The first of these preconceptions concerns the way in which the category of ‘region’ is conceptualised. In this, the new doomsdayism is unequivocal. It is built on an undifferentiated notion of region. In a process described by Cook Islands prime minister, Sir Geoffrey Henry, as having ‘thrown a net across the Pacific’ (*Pacific Report*, 7:15, 1994, 5), the new doomsdayism reduces the complexity and diversity of this area to simple depictions of ‘the South Pacific’, ‘the Pacific island state’, ‘economy’ or ‘leader’. Whether in the general statements of the *Pacific 2010* project, the Minister’s statements, or the main newspaper and television commentary, the region is spoken of without recognising any categories of difference. This implied uniformity predisposes those receiving these authoritative depictions to imagine each island country as having a rapidly disappearing forest as a result of irresponsible management of the timber industry (when most island countries do not even have a timber industry or substantial forest to exploit); as having a poorly managed airline running at a substantial loss; as being led by ‘corrupt’ and inept leaders who ‘say one thing and do another’; as exhibiting a ‘muddling-through’ style of management; as never having attempted public sector reform or export-led development; as having a very high population growth and a stagnant economy. And yet this general picture does not fit the experience of any particular country.

The depiction of the situation regarding population is a particularly pertinent example because it was high population growth which prompted the *Pacific 2010*’s doomsday scenario. The region is depicted as becoming overcrowded and the individual Pacific island country’s population as ‘soaring’. When we look more closely at the research on which the doomsday scenario is based we see that what is being talked about are seven countries out of the fourteen in the islands region: Fiji, Western Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. In two of these cases—Western Samoa and Tonga—it is concluded that net population growth is quite low. The South Pacific generalisation, and the image of a mythical Pacific island state, is made on the basis of projections for five countries.

This problem is underlined by contrasting the doomsdayist imagery of an overcrowded South Pacific with the image presented by Professor R.G. Ward (1989) in his article entitled ‘Earth’s Empty Quarter’ written four years before the *Pacific 2010* doomsday scenario. Ward argues that the problem for the South Pacific is an emptying out of the islands. In the text he is explicit that his conclusions are drawn mainly from an assessment of Micronesian and Polynesian countries (about two-thirds of the region’s countries) but in the heading and general argument it gives
the impression of a generalisation for the whole South Pacific entirely at odds with the picture presented by the Pacific 2010 project:

However, perhaps 100 years hence...almost all of the descendants of today's Polynesian and Micronesian islanders will live in Auckland, Sydney, San Francisco and Salt Lake City. Occasionally they may recall that their ancestors once lived on tiny Pacific islands. Even more occasionally they may visit the resorts which, catering for scuba divers, academic researchers, or gamblers, may provide the only permanent human activities on lonely Pacific Islands, set in an empty ocean (Ward 1989, 245).

One possible explanation of the generation of the region-wide generalisations in the new doomsdayism is that they reflect an Australian official, academic and media perception of Papua New Guinea writ large. As a massive assistance-giver and with, to this point, most going as budgetary aid over which Australia has no say, this could reflect Australian frustration with problems in Papua New Guinea and a feeling that Papua New Guinea is wasting Australia's money. A second explanation is a slightly expanded version of the first. It reflects a perception of the Melanesian countries writ large to cover all island countries of the Forum region. Helen Fraser claims that:

Australian officials have acknowledged privately that the [Bilney] speech was written primarily with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu in mind (‘the countries that are important to Australia’ as one official put it) (Fraser 1994, 3).

She asks ‘what does this imply about the importance to Australia of its relations with nine other Forum member countries?’ This view is supported by the generalisations made about population growth which were mainly drawn from Melanesian experience; the preoccupation with timber, a Melanesian resource. But there is the anomaly of PNG having a 14 per cent growth rate in 1993, the highest in the world. This is not generalised to the region, though the mismanagement associated with the PNG economy is. Hence, this suggests a third way in which these generalisations are generated—taking a worst case in a given area and generalising from that: South Tarawa for overcrowding, the Marshall Islands for polluted lagoons, Polynesian Airlines for airline mismanagement, et cetera. The abstract Pacific island state and the mythical Pacific island person thus becomes a composite of worst cases. The denial of diversity is also encouraged by the ideology underlying the doomsdayist depiction. Central to that ideology is the assumption that all are equal under the market, and that whatever the starting place, the solution is the same.

In this preconception, the new doomsdayism continues the approach of the previous dominant depiction of the post-colonial period. In their efforts to create the idea of the South Pacific as a strategic entity, development unit and management
area during the 1970s and 1980s, Australian policy-makers and policy-related social scientists tended to reduce the wide variety of regional circumstances to a simple stereotyped island society, and a uni-dimensional native person. Particularly in the Cold War, which dominated the thinking of 1976–88, Australian policy approaches were built on extremely generalised images of the region and on the existence of a typical Pacific island state, economy and leader. While the academic development literature had admitted some diversity in resource endowments and potential, it was a more general proposition stifling diversity that was adopted as part of the main discourse and imagery of the South Pacific—that of non-viability and vulnerability for all island states. This was particularly so in the strategic studies literature which was the discipline closest to the depictions prominent in media and government circles (Fry 1993, 231–2).

While this type of framing dominated in Australian policy circles for much of the post-colonial period, there was a brief period, from 1988–93, when there was some questioning of this premise. Under the leadership of the new Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, and reflecting a view already held in the Pacific islands branch of his department, there emerged an official recognition of the diversity and complexity of the societies and peoples that fell within the South Pacific. This was first set out in the doctrine of ‘constructive commitment’ announced by Evans in September 1988. In his speech to the Foreign Correspondents Association, shortly after becoming Minister, Evans reported on his recent travels through the islands:

I saw for myself the real individuality of the countries of the South West Pacific, an individuality which underlined the error of some past Australian perceptions of the region as a group of friendly, uncomplicated—and indistinguishable—islands.

...too often the very real differences between, for example, even such near Polynesian neighbours as Tonga and Western Samoa, or such near Melanesian neighbours as Vanuatu and the Solomons, have been overlooked in generalised, not to mention romanticised, views of the Pacific (Evans 1988, 347).

Although Minister Bilney claimed that the government’s new policy approach was a continuation of the constructive commitment doctrine, with appropriate adjustments for the global changes that have occurred since the Evans statement, the new conception in fact constituted a return to the dominant Australian mode of framing the islands through stereotype.

**Framing and belittlement**

In relation to the second preconception, concerning the degree to which Pacific islanders are consistently belittled in the imagery associated with the depiction, the
evidence is more mixed. On the one hand, it has an egalitarian image of ‘the Pacific islander’ and the Pacific Island state contained in it which is advanced by the Minister and by Rowan Callick as a positive departure from previous depictions. No longer are island countries to be seen as restricted by the paternalistic notion of ‘smallness’; rather they should all be seen as having equal potentiality to develop if they change themselves and jettison old notions of sovereignty and restricting traditions. These images, however, like earlier missionary images, are concerned with potential equality if Pacific islanders do what Australians advise.

The doomsdayist images of islanders now, and in the recent past, tell a different story. As we have seen, these are consistently disparaging and employ many of the familiar stereotypes. The general picture is that Pacific island leaders are corrupt, ‘muddlers-through’, administratively incompetent, irresponsible, duplicitous, uncaring about their children’s futures and that they have failed to deliver ‘development’. In the two key doomsdayist documents, Callick’s doomsday scenario and the Minister’s FCA address, there are no positive images of the current or past leadership. All development efforts of the past decades have simply failed. The presentation of various Australian proposals for regional and national strategies—for example, on fisheries, public sector reform, privatisation, export-oriented development, and connections with Asian economies—as new, reinforces the image of nothing having been attempted in these areas before this. There is even a hint of the longstanding image of the child-like islander in Bilney’s speech to the FCA where he argues ‘that spoon-feeding will no longer get island countries where they want to go’ and in Keating’s surprise in speaking of the capacities of the island leaders in the 1994 South Pacific Forum:

And the thing that impressed me, I must say, particularly, was the political will that they all showed in seeking to meet those challenges and their willingness to actually [my emphasis] grasp the nettle on big problems (Keating 1994, 2).

The doomsdayist imagery is not just consistently disparaging and negative; this is also imagery that is exaggerated and other-worldy. Even those institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which share many of the same concerns, do not use this sort of imagery, preferring the normal terms used to describe perceived problems in other parts of the world (for example, Brown 1995, 1–2). While embracing the doomsday imagery, newspaper editors, television producers and speech writers, have not been able to let go of the paradise image. Minister Bilney, for example, after describing the ‘dismal result’ of island development in the past decade, adds ‘Paradise it’s not.’ (1994b, 21); a Sydney Morning Herald editorial is headed ‘Paradise Lost in the South Pacific’ (29 June 1994, 10); Kerry O’Brien in introducing the ‘Pacific Nightmare’ Lateline program refers to ‘the fading image of South Pacific paradise’ (ABC Lateline, 1), and Meet
the Press presenter, Barrie Cassidy, introduces the topic of the evening as ‘troubles in paradise’ (Network Ten, 1). The impression is given that paradise was some actual recent past state rather than an invention of the European imagination. The fall to a nightmare state seems greater when the move is from paradise—from one mythical and other-worldly extreme to another—than if societies with various problems were said to move to a situation where some problems were accentuated and others declined. Ultimately the fall is from the paradise of the European imagination.

In this the new doomsdayism is a continuation of the imagery of the Cold War period. The advent of a post-colonial South Pacific did not put an end to depictions of Pacific islanders as inferior in Australian official discourse, media imagery and depictions within strategic studies. Indeed, Cold War lenses, and the Australian government’s developing self-image as leader (for the first time) of the region, encouraged the continuation of belittling images, and a sidelining even of images of potential equality. A geopolitical conceptual approach meant that, as in the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to view the region through a ‘balance of power’ lens, in which Pacific islanders were largely absent as a serious presence. Where Pacific islanders and Pacific island states appeared in this depiction they were seen as vulnerable to entreaty, with the potential to inadvertently upset the balance through ignorance, or inexperience.

Implicit in Australian policy and media opinion was the image of the island state as only worthy of second class citizenship in international society. Australian governments under Liberal and Labor parties attempted to apply a disciplinary regime which expected behaviour of island states not expected of Australia. For example, trade or fishing agreements with the Soviet Union were considered taboo, as was the establishment of a Soviet embassy in the islands region. The approach by the Soviet Union to Kiribati was assumed to lead inexorably to a military base. The Kiribati leadership was assumed to be gullible and easily manipulated. Independent or non-aligned talk, common throughout the Third World, was viewed as pro-Soviet rather than as issuing from the independent capacity of island leaders to have their own opinion and agenda. Pacific island states, and Pacific islanders, were portrayed as passive and childlike. A Pacific strategic personality, influenced by the Grenada episode of 1983, was married to the already existing notion of Pacific economic man developed in economics, and to the ‘smallness’ notion dominant in development studies. The imagery applied to the region as a whole was dramatic and exaggerated and bore little resemblance to the actual experiences of any part of it (Fry 1992).

The imagery associated with Evans’s constructive commitment doctrine at the close of the Cold War constituted a departure from this tradition. Not only did it re-establish a visible Pacific islander and a Pacific island state through its emphasis
on diversity and complexity; it also introduced empowering images. No longer were Pacific islanders portrayed as passive or childlike. There was a recognition of sovereignty. This was a product of a re-evaluation of Australia’s role because, although Australia had still seen itself as leading the South Pacific towards the end of the Cold War, the island states were no longer following. In Evans’s 1988 idea of ‘partnership’ and denial of ‘hegemony’ was an implicit recognition of equality although, as I have argued elsewhere, there were in his 1989 regional security policy still vestiges of the Australian Monroe Doctrine which implied an inferior island region (Fry 1991). Again, then, the new doomsdayism represents a return to the subordinating images of the Cold War and a departure from the Evans era.

The framer and the frame

The third epistemological premise concerns the relationship the framers assume between themselves and the frame. In the Cold War years, Australia (whether in government, academe or media) continued to place itself firmly outside the region in its conceptions of ‘the South Pacific’. While it aspired to leadership of the islands area, it viewed itself as quite distinct from ‘them’. Cold War thinking accentuated this self-image of being outside the framed region (while seeing itself as manager of it). As seen from Canberra, ‘the South Pacific’ (not Australia) was seen as vulnerable and potentially unstable and its economies as non-viable, and therefore particular standards should be expected of island state international behaviour not expected of itself or other Western nations. Although the notion of ‘one strategic entity’ was promoted by Australian defence planners, it was evident that they had in mind a two-tier region with Australia (and New Zealand) having different rights and obligations (Dibb 1989, 66, 70).

Increasingly in the 1980s, Australia began to place itself within the regional frame, but only for certain purposes. It did so particularly on nuclear issues where it began to speak of ‘we’ in the South Pacific. This was reflected in Australia placing itself within the regional boundary of the South Pacific Nuclear-free Zone Treaty and placing its east coast in the South Pacific’s anti-dumping regime under the Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific. When Senator Evans became Foreign Minister he attempted to make this conceptual shift a more conscious move. In his speech to the Foreign Correspondents Association in September 1988, significantly entitled Australia in the South Pacific, he explicitly acknowledges the need for Australia to be part of a regional identity, as part of moving away from the hegemonic approaches of the past (Evans 1988).

The new doomsdayism appears at first sight to continue the trend established by Senator Evans, and the more consultative approaches to conceptualising regional security towards the end of the Cold War (for example, Polomka and Hegarty 1987).
As we have seen, Minister Bilney couched Australia’s right to speak on Pacific island futures on the fact that Australia has had to adjust to global change and take the hard road of structural adjustment. This is seemingly placing Australian experience in the frame. But what is put in are the successes, not the failures or continuing problems. The whole tenor of the new doomsdayism is that it is we in Australia who have succeeded who are depicting you in the South Pacific who have failed. The return to the ‘them’ and ‘us’ of the Cold War period is symbolised in the title of the Minister’s address to the Foreign Correspondents Association: Australia’s Relations with the South Pacific.\(^8\) The speech is subtitled ‘challenge and change’ but significantly there are no changes or challenges for Australia in stark contrast to the self-reflective Evans address of 1988. It is a speech about how ‘we’ are seeing ‘your’ problems. When ‘we’ is used inclusively to mean ‘we in the South Pacific’ it is only in the context of what ‘we’ have to do about your problems.

Yet many of the problems which the doomsdayists draw attention to in ‘the South Pacific’ are common within Australia. While Minister Bilney was pointing the finger at ‘expensive national symbols’ in the region, and in particular at the national airlines, the Australian National (shipping) Line (ANL) was running at a massive loss and it was clear that the government was not prepared to make the hard decisions about it (Verrender and Davies 1994, Millett 1994). The attack on public authority mismanagement in the island countries was launched after Australia had just been through a series of high profile revelations about public authority mismanagement and failure in Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria contributing to a change of government in each of those states. The continual cry of the Minister, and Callick and other journalists, that the island leaders were selling out their future generations by not achieving higher returns on the tuna fishery looked curious against the knowledge that Australia was receiving less return from the Japanese fishing fleets than the Pacific islands for tuna fishing off the east coast (Warnock 1995). Drawing attention to the impact of climate change, as an issue which Pacific islands would have to confront, when Australia was a significant contributor to the problem (Riley 1994) and had worked against a meaningful global regime, was disingenuous. Deforestation, and the failure of governments to implement control policies could have applied to Australia as much as the Solomon Islands. And finally, environmental problems in areas such as coastal management, coral reef, and land degradation are at least as serious within Australia as in the Pacific islands.\(^9\)

\(^8\) Curiously, however, at the same time Australia was placing itself outside the South Pacific boundary in the new doomsayism, it placed itself firmly within the South Pacific region when it came to leading the Pacific campaign against the renewal of French nuclear testing at Moruroa and Fangataufa.

\(^9\) See, for example, Woodford (1996) in which the findings of the State of the Environment report is summarised.
This is not to suggest that the existence of serious, and in many cases worse, difficulties in similar areas in Australia makes problems in particular island countries any less serious. It should, however, introduce a little humility and perhaps a caution about the way these issues are described. For example, it is not commonly assumed in Australia that because ANL has been poorly managed, that all public sector management is poor throughout Australia, or further, that this is due to some essential quality of being Australian. Moreover, it would be less distancing, less sustaining of the division between ‘we’ the successful managers and ‘you’ the failed islanders, if Australian problems were also invoked. This might also act as a reminder that many of these problems are endemic to the modern development process wherever it occurs.

The issue of inclusion also arises in relation to the extent to which, and how, the doomsdayists encourage the participation of representatives of the societies they are framing in the making of this new conception of their reality. The total exclusion of Pacific islanders from such a role was a defining element of colonialism; and it remained remarkably intact as a preconception of knowledge-making through the Cold War years of the post-colonial period. Although there was constant dialogue through the South Pacific Forum it was generally conducted within parameters already established in an Australian conception. This presumption gradually came under challenge from Pacific leaders. The acceptance of this challenge was at least implied in Evans’s idea of ‘partnership’ from 1988, although there were still indications that he intended a partnership in which Australian conceptual influence would still be dominant.

At one level the new doomsdayism appears to be a development of the partnership notion. Minister Bilney, Callick and the Pacific 2010 project organisers are adamant that they are not seeking to prescribe, but just put facts before decision-makers (Bilney 1994a). This suggests that they envisage maximum participation by those whose past and future are being conceptualised. And they would argue the ideas were discussed by the leaders at the Forum or at conferences organised by Pacific 2010. But this is misleading. What Pacific island leaders are asked to participate in is devising the strategies to deal with ‘the facts’ established by the Australian framers. The agenda was set. Thus, for example, although the organisers sincerely envisaged islander involvement, the three or four island officials asked to the launching of the Pacific 2010 were asked to respond as to how they were going to deal with the facts established by the project. In Lateline’s ‘Pacific Nightmare’ program the Pacific prime ministers are asked how they were going to avoid ‘the nightmare’. The conception of Pacific reality already has the status of knowledge in the minds of the Australian media, policy-makers and academics. Thus, not only do the framers exclude their own experiences from the frame; they also exclude Pacific islanders from participation in the framing of the new conceptions of their past and future. This, I would argue, marks a continuation
of a longstanding practice which supports the subordination of those depicted by the knowledge.

**Framing and certainty**

Finally, there is the question of the degree to which the doomsdayists present their perspective as the one true Pacific reality. Australians, like other Europeans, have nearly always presented their conceptions of the island world with great confidence. The conceptions of Pacific islanders as inferior races, or as doomed to extinction, were presented not as contingent beliefs but with certainty based on science or simply the given starting point—that which is known. While the nature of the characterisations and conceptions of the island region changed over time, the assumption was that some external reality had changed rather than the premises of the knowledge-makers.

I have already asserted that such a claim to truth is a central feature of the way in which the new doomsdayism has been promoted and defended. Much of its power and legitimacy is tied up in its presentation of its depiction as unassailable fact and authoritative knowledge. In the *Pacific 2010* objectives, and when the Minister is downplaying the Australian desire to impose on island societies, the stated aim is to simply put the facts before island leaders so that they can then make up their mind about the best course of action (Bilney 1994a,13). In their more explicitly prescriptive moments, where, for example, the Minister or Callick sets out what must be done if certain doomsday is to be avoided (and, *sotto voce*, Australian aid to be continued), this is done with great certainty as if there were no competing perspectives. As we have already seen, this claim to truth is built on shaky foundations in its assumption of an undifferentiated region, in its construction of a fictitious island state and person, and in its assumption that it is only describing a changing reality ‘out there’ in the Pacific when the depicted reality is as much about a changing Australia.

This presumption of truth, underpinned by indisputable facts, can also be challenged in several other ways. The way in which some facts are derived and represented is highly questionable. These are not just any facts but those that provide the foundational evidence for the overall depiction, those concerning economic growth and demographic patterns. In their account of GDP growth, the new doomsdayists repeat the distortion in the World Bank’s representation of the experience of some island countries (excluding Papua New Guinea, for example) as that of ‘the Pacific islands’ as a whole. Following the World Bank, they also rely upon averaging across the region (or six countries in the region) over a decade. The conclusion drawn by the doomsdayists of failure by all (or any one) of the island countries, on the basis of this measure, simply does not follow. To see the absurdity of this, we only have to ask what would have happened if this same averaging was
done for 1993 and had included Papua New Guinea. In 1993 Papua New Guinea had the highest GDP growth in the world (14 per cent). This would give a completely distorted view of the South Pacific average, but presumably on this basis the South Pacific could be represented as a successful region heading towards paradise! Nor can the central assumption of ‘poor economic and financial management’ be regarded as an indisputable fact. The World Bank, for example, in its original statement of the Pacific paradox, refers to Pacific island management of the 1980s as ‘prudent’.

In relation to the demographic projections, we have already seen the distortion introduced by representing the population growth rates of five countries as the experience of the whole South Pacific. Some Pacific demographers have also mounted a substantial critique of the methodology and the conclusions drawn from the quantitative data in the doomsday projections and in other similar regional studies (Hayes 1994, Pirie 1995, Underhill-Sem 1994).

A second challenge to the presumption of certain knowledge concerns the appropriateness of the facts assembled as evidence of the correctness of their depiction of the development situation. The problems of relying on GDP growth as the indicator of island development have been raised by Claire Slatter in her critique of the World Bank approach (Slatter 1994) and by the Pacific prime ministers in their comments on the doomsday picture in the ABC Lateline program. The reliance on a GDP growth-centred analysis means that the doomsdayists do not count in the important subsistence sector; they also miss the informal extra-regional nature of island economies described by Hau’ofa (1994).

To see how contestable are the conclusions the doomsdayists assert as certain knowledge, we only have to imagine what the Australian conception would have looked like if it had been built on the assumptions of the United Nations Development Program’s Pacific Human Development Report (1994) instead of those employed in the World Bank reports (1991, 1993). The Pacific Human Development Report accepts many of the same tenets about problems in population growth and low economic growth but places them in a different context. First, it does not see development only in crude growth terms. It values other achievements, and other indicators, of Pacific island life. Second, it looks at the diversity of experience across the Pacific. Third, it values community participation in development processes, and fourth, it places value on equitable distribution. The result is an image of islanders and island societies which is a mixed report card, but one which does not resort to the reductionist and alarmist approach of the Australian conception. It demonstrates achievements as well as problems. It shows that some island countries are relatively high achievers on some indicators, pointing, for example, to the dramatic increases in life expectancy that have been achieved in many island countries over the past decade. It does not present customary land tenure or
traditional family systems as a problem to be overcome if development is to proceed but as a source of strength. It also recognises the substantial obstacles facing island countries (UNDP, 1994).

The UNDP's quite different depiction of the past and present development picture in the South Pacific was embraced by all Pacific island leaders in 1994 when the Human Development Declaration, based on its conception, was signed by all leaders at the Brisbane Forum. Its picture of island development was also cited by Ratu Mara, President of Fiji, and a critic of the doomsdayist characterisation of past development achievements. He regarded the following UNDP account as a useful corrective to the images of total failure associated with the doomsdayists:

Considerable progress has been made in improving the quality of life and well-being of people in the Pacific. There is generally a stable and secure civil environment; people are living longer; opportunities for learning, improvement in literacy and enhancement of human capabilities have increased; the subsistence sector continues to support an adequate level of living for most of the people; cash-earning opportunities have been generated in both the formal and informal sectors of the economies (UNDP in Mara 1994, 38–9).

The certainty with which solutions are put forward can also be challenged. While the economic rationalist nostrums are presented as uncomplicated, universally applicable strategies, there is silence on the downside of the success stories elsewhere in the Asia–Pacific region or the Caribbean that are held out as models, for example, in the environmental areas held to be important in the doomsdayist position. There is also no recognition of the incompatibility between objectives. The ideal is held to be export-oriented industry like Western Samoa’s automotive parts factory. If Kiribati, for example, were successful in attracting such investment to Tarawa, which would be very difficult, the impact on overpopulation around the capital and environmental problems in the lagoon would be increased, not reduced. The advocacy of a strategy of moving away from customary land tenure, large families, and traditions incompatible with capitalism, does not recognise that this is a gamble which only pays off if the investment comes, the jobs come to your family, and the state redistributes to the needy, looks after the aged, and so on. It also assumes that the investment capital does not move on as lower cost sites are found (as when the automotive parts factory moved from Mr Bilney’s electorate to Western Samoa). In the face of this uncertainty, the presentation of such strategies as the only way to proceed is disingenuous. There are implications for equity. To achieve a higher crude growth rate would not necessarily raise most peoples’ living standards and Pacific islanders would have to trade-in a system of security that has served them well for an uncertain future.
Conclusion

For several generations Australians have generated powerful depictions of a region they have variously called ‘the islands’, ‘the South Seas’, or ‘the South Pacific’, and of the peoples who live there. I have proceeded on the assumption, pace Hau’ofa, that this has mattered for island societies. I have suggested that it is, therefore, important to think about how these conceptualisations are generated and to ask what ethical judgements might be made about the exercise of power inherent in this longstanding practice. I have focused on the conception dominant in contemporary media, policy and academic representations as a window onto this practice.

There have been a variety of motivations involved in Australian framings of the Pacific islands: some have intended domination, others have attempted to advance self-determination and development. The new doomsdayism falls within the stream of thought motivated largely by benevolent concern with raising living standards and self-determination, although other interests to do with ‘regional stability’ can also be discerned in the background. In this sense, it falls within missionary approaches to the islands—whether Christian, Marxist, liberal, or developmental. But, as I have implied throughout, benevolent intent should not be the final word in the ethical justification for hegemony. In the case of the new doomsdayism, the thrust of my argument is that benevolent intention is belied by the subordinating assumptions embedded in the way in which this knowledge is constructed. The doomsdayists, like earlier Australian framers of the islands, are engaged in a system of knowledge that implicitly denies self-determination while claiming to advance it, and promotes superiority and exclusion while claiming to advance equality. At the heart of the new doomsdayism is the assumption of a special right to manage, steeped in old racist premises, which are the most difficult to acknowledge. For these reasons, I would also contend that the new conception does not represent the departure from the earlier representations associated with the ‘smallness’ notion that Hau’ofa desires. While its new images of the region and of the potentialities of its inhabitants might at first sight appear to mark such a departure, the underlying preconceptions continue the subordination inherent in the development and security discourses of the Cold War era.

Nor is it sufficient or appropriate to base the ethical defence of hegemony in the claim to truth and the duty of sharing that truth. I have attempted to show that such claims in the case of new doomsdayism are fundamentally flawed. The certainty with which the new depiction has been put forward, the evangelical tone with which it has been promoted, and the dramatic and exaggerated imagery associated with it, suggest that the answer may lie as much within a changing Australian imagination as a changing reality ‘out there’. Second, the conception is built on unacknowledged assumptions about an abstract region and the existence of an essential island leader. Third, it denies whole aspects of Pacific island
experiences. This is not to deny the existence of significant problems in particular places of the kind described in the general portrait. Nor is it to deny the right of Australians to speak and represent island life. But if Australian knowledge of the South Pacific is to avoid the charge of hegemonic and belittling thought, there will have to be recognition of the subordinating preconceptions which continue to underlie Australian framings of the Pacific islands.

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