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## LENDING A FIST? AUSTRALIA'S NEW INTERVENTIONISM IN THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC

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The year 2003 marked a significant change in Australia's strategic relations with the island Pacific, including Papua New Guinea (PNG).<sup>1</sup> Since gaining independence in the 1970s, the states of the Southwest Pacific have been largely left to control their own political and economic affairs. While providing substantial amounts of bilateral aid, Australia has been sensitive to charges of neo-colonialism and interference with national sovereignty. All this appears to have changed, however, with the Howard government's adoption of a distinctly more robust and interventionist approach. The objective is to restore or enhance security and stability in the troubled Pacific island states. Although poverty reduction and sustainable development continue to be its primary goals, the Australian aid program is now being calibrated to reflect Canberra's new strategic priorities. In practice, there is also an increasing reliance on the deployment of Australian personnel in key government agencies in recipient countries.

The two principal manifestations of the new approach are the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) that was deployed to Honiara in mid-2003 and the proposed Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) to Papua New Guinea. Australia has also become actively engaged in the near-

bankrupt state of Nauru. Police Commissioners have been provided to both Fiji and Nauru. There has also been a focus on strengthening regional governance. In August 2003, Canberra secured the appointment of a former Australian diplomat as the new secretary general of the Pacific Islands Secretariat with a mandate to reform and invigorate this body. This reversed a longstanding convention that only Pacific islanders were eligible for appointment. John Howard has also made clear that future Australian aid to the Pacific will be linked to efforts by recipient governments to improve standards of governance and combat corruption. The new hands-on approach has inevitably ruffled feathers, not least among an older generation of independence leaders who resent Canberra's stridency and the perceived threat this represents to national sovereignty.

While Australia's renewed engagement with its Pacific neighbours is to be welcomed, questions arise as to what lies behind this change of policy and its likely impact in the recipient countries. Calls for a new approach toward the Pacific have been coming for some time from Australian 'think tanks', such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Centre for Independent Studies, as well as from several prominent journalists with experience in the

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region.<sup>2</sup> RAMSI has been well received by most Solomon Islanders and has succeeded in restoring internal security within a remarkably short period of time. There also appear to be considerable popular support in PNG for the proposed ECP. Concerns about sovereignty expressed by some political leaders do not appear to be shared widely at grassroots levels. Although some might balk at the naming of John Howard as 'Pacific Man of the Year' in a leading regional magazine (Callick 2003), Canberra's assertive new leadership has so far met with an overwhelmingly positive reception among the larger Pacific community.

The full implications of these recent developments remain to be seen. It is still early days in respect of the engagements in the Solomon Islands and PNG, as well as in terms of the reform of regional governance. Canberra's approach is also more *ad hoc* than it might at first appear. Graham Dobell, foreign correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has suggested that it is essentially policy 'made on the run' (Dobell 2004). This quality, combined with the pace at which events are unfolding, complicates the task of evaluation.

Regional and international media greeted the deployment of RAMSI as a bold new departure in Australia's relations with the region. Writing in *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan referred to 'a historic turning point in the way we relate to our neighbours' (*Australian* 1 July 2003), while his colleague, Paul Kelly, stated that a 'NEW phase of Australian policy has begun with the end of our 30-year hands-off approach to the Pacific region and the assumption of a role as the metropolitan power' (*Australian* 3 July 2003). The ECP in Papua New Guinea has been read in a similar light. Whether or not Canberra's approach amounts to the paradigm shift claimed by some (Kampmark 2003), the renewed focus on its Pacific neighbours is something that most observers would welcome. The region has all too often been relegated to the outer perimeters of Australia's foreign policy agenda despite the mounting challenges facing a number of countries.

Renewed engagement provides a rare opportunity to help Pacific island countries address these challenges. Indeed, if the level of commitment is sustained, it provides the most significant opportunity for implementing fundamental reform since the original era of decolonisation in the 1970s. Of course, much depends on what kind of 'reform' is being proposed and who is making the decisions. How closely does Australia's new policy agenda correspond with the interests and priorities of the countries

concerned? Clearly, the success and sustainability of these engagements depends, in large part, on high levels of ownership among the recipient countries.

Having been criticised for not attending previous Pacific Islands Forum meetings, the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, has now become a strident advocate for strengthened regional governance and has, among other things, called for the pooling of resources in areas such as airlines and police training (Lewis and Harvey 2003). Few would dispute the limited impact of the Pacific Islands Forum. Since its inception, it has been an observer rather than a leader or shaper of regional developments. In theory, a reinvigorated vehicle of regional governance could assist the Pacific island countries, not least in their dealings with their larger and, at times, overbearing neighbours. Regional governance is a fact of political life in many parts of the world. The advantages of moving in this direction are obvious given the challenges of location, scale and diversity in the Pacific islands region. There has been a lot of discussion about regionalism over the past year. Many proposals were floated in the Australian Senate Committee Report — *A Pacific Engaged* — published in August 2003. These included recommendations that the Pacific island countries explore the possibility of a shared currency and, significantly, a common labour market. The report also called for a common budgetary and fiscal discipline through the region (Australian Senate Committee Report 2003). Many of these ideas are not new and have been around, in one form or another, for years. What is important is the opportunity for Pacific islanders to take an active role in building a more effective regional voice for managing domestic challenges and relations with the wider world.

While they present opportunities, Australia's changing relations with the Pacific inevitably include an element of risk. The style and tone of the messages emanating from Canberra have already generated resentment among some leaders in the region. At worst, these statements can come across as condescending and arrogant. There is often little understanding demonstrated of the particular histories and social complexity of the Pacific countries. For example, Australia's role as former administrator of PNG and the character of its colonial legacy are rarely acknowledged in the consistently negative assessments of that country. Canberra's lack of sensitivity can, on occasion, generate resistance to proposals that might otherwise be well received. Last year's friction between the Howard and Somare governments over the review of the Australian aid program is a case in point.

More substantive concerns relate to Australia's diagnoses and prioritisation of problems in the region and the kinds of remedial strategies being proposed. These can be summarised as follows:

- The *centrality of security considerations* in Canberra's current assessment of the challenges facing the Pacific islands and, in particular, the implications of viewing these countries through the lens of the Washington-led 'war on terror'. Looked at in this way, the focus is squarely on the alleged threat posed to Australia by its nearest neighbours, particularly those states that are deemed to be 'failing' or at risk of 'failing'. The issue of what precisely 'failure' means, what is failing, or why it is failing (e.g. the internal dynamics of crisis in the countries concerned) is rarely addressed in any depth.

- Not surprisingly, this viewpoint tends to privilege solutions aimed at enhancing security particularly in relation to the perceived threats of international crime, people smuggling, border and customs control, and, of course, terrorism. While these and other potential risks cannot be ruled out, the question is how real they are for countries that are simultaneously facing a range of profound development issues? The prospect of Islamic terrorists establishing themselves in either the Solomon Islands or PNG is, to say the least, remote. Superimposing an external security agenda on the island Pacific risks obscuring more pressing domestic challenges, such as growing levels of inequality, impoverishment and marginalisation, as well as PNG's potentially catastrophic AIDS/HIV epidemic. There is the real prospect of a progressive *securitisation of aid*, with donor assistance being shaped progressively by an external, and questionable, security agenda.

- A further concern relates to the *state-centric character* of the assistance being offered under the auspices of these engagements. While state-building remains a priority throughout Melanesia, it is necessary to appreciate the historical and broader context of state 'weakness' in countries where the socio-political realities are relentlessly local. The postcolonial states in the Pacific have very different and much shorter histories than those of their more developed counterparts. State-building in the former remains at a relatively early stage. Recent developments raise important questions about the appropriateness of the centralised state and other aspects of the formal system of government inherited at independence. Greater appreciation is needed of the critical role of non-state and sub-national institutions in ordering the daily lives of most citizens. Appropriate and sustainable approaches to state building need to be grounded in the socio-

political realities of these particular countries and not simply derived from global templates. Appreciating the complexities of state- and nation-building in arguably the most ethnically diverse region in the world is also necessary for establishing realistic time frames.

- The limited degree of consultation and negotiation with local stakeholders in the shaping and implementation of the new assistance programs is another area of concern. High levels of *understanding, ownership and participation* among both governments and local communities are critical to the longer-term success of these engagements.

- Obvious questions about *sustainability* are raised by these engagements. Assistance is increasingly delivered through the placement of significant numbers of Australian officials in key positions in domestic government agencies. What happens when these officials leave? Will the recipient country be in a position to sustain the benefits derived from them?

Before examining some of these issues in the context of Solomon Islands and PNG, let me return briefly to the character of Canberra's new approach. As mentioned above, the evolving policy is more *ad hoc* than its proclamation as a major paradigm shift suggests. Moreover, while media commentaries have conflated the engagement in the Solomon Islands and PNG as illustrative of the same overall approach, there are important differences between the two. Likewise, while much is new, there are some important continuities with past policies.

RAMSI is certainly new in terms of its scale, regional character, and the sheer ambition of its objectives. Commenting on the proposed intervention, Australian journalist Greg Sheridan said 'We are seeking nothing less than to remake a nation' (*Australian* 1 July). The Solomon Islands mission is the first example of regional assistance to a member state conducted, albeit retrospectively, under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Biketawa Declaration. The latter, agreed to in 2000, contains a commitment on the part of Forum leaders to take collective action where there are security crises in member states. According to Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, RAMSI is an example of 'cooperative intervention', undertaken at the request of the Solomon Islands government with the participation of Forum member states. It is also new in terms of being a police-led intervention. The significant military component was provided essentially as back-up to the police and as a potent reminder to former militants and gunmen of RAMSI's coercive capacity.

At the same time, important antecedents for the intervention are to be found in Australia's role in East Timor, Bougainville, and, more recently, in the successful collaboration between Australian and Indonesian police in the investigation of the 2002 Bali bombings. These engagements have added considerably to Australian experience and confidence in the area of external interventions. In addition, as Greg Fry has pointed out, the decision to intervene in the Solomon Islands was, in many ways, a return to the policy of the former Hawke government of the late 1980s (Fry 2004). Under the so-called Evans' doctrine formulated at that time, there was a commitment to intervene on behalf of the legitimate government of a Pacific island state, if requested, and where there existed an appropriate exit strategy.

The Enhanced Cooperation Program in Papua New Guinea is different to RAMSI. It is not a regional initiative and has been agreed under the longstanding bilateral relationship between PNG and Australia. The mistaken view that it is essentially a RAMSI 'Mark II' aimed at rescuing PNG's 'failing state' has contributed to tensions between Port Moresby and Canberra. As its name implies, the ECP is an enhanced form of the assistance that PNG has been receiving from Australia for many years. Australia's substantial development assistance program to PNG has covered various sectors of government and, in the case of the police, has involved a major capacity building project dating back fifteen years. While the method of delivery will be new, the capacity building objectives of the ECP are by no means a radical departure from past practice. Likewise, many older ideas are being recycled in the case of the renewed focus on regional governance.

What is new is the placing of seconded Australian officials, including police officers, in line positions where they will operate as employees of domestic government agencies, rather than as technical advisers or consultants working for Australian managing contractors. This is viewed by Canberra's decision makers as a more direct and effective way of achieving change in the organisations and bureaucracies concerned. It is also an approach that unless handled with sensitivity and skill could easily generate resentment and resistance among local officials. From an Australian perspective, there are also considerable challenges associated with the 'whole of government' approach adopted in these engagements. More bits of the Australian government are now involved in development assistance than at any previous time in recent years. In addition to the Australian Federal Police (and probably members of state police

forces in the case of PNG), there are likely to be officials from the departments of Defence, Treasury and Customs. Issues of coordination are clearly critical, not least to avoid reproducing Canberra's bureaucratic rivalries in Port Moresby or Honiara. At the Canberra end, it is also clear that the Prime Minister's Office has assumed a leading role in the formulation and steering of Australia's new policy engagements in the region. Among other things, this means that key decisions are being made increasingly by those lacking extensive regional and development experience, while the traditional repositories of development expertise, notably the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), are relegated to the outer circle.

## **THE REGIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION TO THE SOLOMON ISLANDS (RAMSI)**

RAMSI was deployed in late July 2003 in response to an appeal from the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza. Canberra mobilised a regional assistance mission led by a police contingent of some 330 police officers, mainly from Australia but with participation from other Forum member states. The Participating Police Force was supplemented initially by around 1,800 military personnel from the region, again largely Australian. The military component has been reduced incrementally as the security situation has improved. Restoring law and order was the immediate priority to be followed by a comprehensive reform program aimed at stabilising government finances, balancing the budget, and reviving investor confidence, as well as strengthening the law and justice sector and rebuilding the SI police force.

### **Was the intervention necessary?**

There were compelling reasons for external intervention. The Solomon Islands government was no longer in control of the country. Ministers and Treasury officials were intimidated routinely, often at gunpoint. The police force was hopelessly fractured and significant numbers had been corrupted. Government services had collapsed and revenues had been siphoned off. Many public servants had abandoned work and those who remained were not being paid regularly. The compensation process established under the Townsville Peace Agreement had been corrupted by former militants and political leaders. Kemakeza's government was deeply compromised

with some ministers actively engaged in corrupt and criminal activities. Guns stolen from police armouries had been dispersed widely and presented a major security threat in Honiara and parts of Guadalcanal and Malaita. Faced with the collapse of the political centre, a number of island provinces were demanding greater autonomy and, in some cases, independence. With the closure of businesses and large commercial enterprises and a drastic fall in revenue collection, the country was effectively bankrupt.

What began as an ethnic conflict had degenerated into the effective capture and paralysis of the Solomon Islands' state by a small cohort of armed ex-militants, including renegade police officers, and corrupt leaders. This process of criminalisation of state (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 1999) had accelerated under both the Sogavare and Kemakeza governments and had, in some respects, been facilitated by the provisions of the flawed Townsville Peace Agreement. 'Authorities' in Honiara were simply incapable of breaking the ensuing deadlock. An external circuit-breaker was thus necessary. For most Solomon Islanders, the main issue was not whether external intervention was necessary but why it took so long in coming.

#### **Why did Australia decide to intervene when it did?**

Canberra had declined several earlier requests for assistance from Honiara. Right up to the beginning of 2003, Foreign Minister Downer had claimed that it would be 'folly in the extreme' to send Australian troops to 'occupy' the country. According to the Australian Foreign Minister 'it would not work' because '(f)oreigners do not have answers for the deep-seated problems affecting the Solomon Islands' (Downer 2003). Less than six months later, Australia mobilised and led the largest deployment of external security personnel to the Solomon Islands since World War II.

There is probably no single reason for the abrupt turnaround in Canberra's approach to Solomon Islands. It more likely reflects the coalescing of a number of factors and considerations. Despite its protracted adherence to the older strategy of non-intervention, there had been mounting concerns in Canberra about regional instability. The 'coups' in Fiji and the Solomon Islands in 2000, and continuing problems of law and order, economic dysfunction and political instability in PNG, provided the basis for extending the idea of a regional 'arc of instability' to the Melanesian states. Parts of the Canberra policy-community were beginning to actively press for a new approach in the region.

#### **Concerns about aid effectiveness**

An important contribution to this process of re-evaluation was the emergence of a strident critique of Australian development assistance in the Pacific region. This critique entails an unlikely convergence between critics on both the left and right of the political spectrum. On the left, critics from within recipient countries and Australia have long derided the aid program as primarily 'boomerang aid', whereby the principal beneficiaries are the Australian companies and consultants who manage and implement AusAID projects. On the right, there is the work of conservative economists such as Peter Bauer (e.g., 2003) and Helen Hughes, both working for the Sydney-based think-tank, the Centre for Independent Studies. Hughes's 2003 report, *Why Aid has Failed the Pacific*, received considerable publicity and struck a sympathetic chord in senior government circles. In it, she argues that Australian aid has failed to deliver on its promises and, moreover, that it is implicated in the dynamics of political and economic dysfunction in the region by fuelling corruption and engendering dependency among recipient states. The reality of aid and its impacts is, of course, significantly more complex and diverse than these critiques imply. There have been successes as well as failures. Likewise the link between aid and government corruption has declined with the move from budgetary support to tied-aid. Arguments for simply ending aid are unlikely to find much support even among the most ardent critics in the recipient countries. At the same time, few would deny that the Australian aid program can be, and needs to be, improved in terms of its practical outcomes.

#### **Changing strategic environment**

The single most significant influence on Canberra's thinking was, of course, the dramatically changed international strategic environment after the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the 2002 Kuta bombing in Bali, and, in particular, the ascendancy of the 'war on terror' as the principal lens for viewing issues of domestic and international security. Having aligned itself closely with the administration of the United States President, George Bush, Canberra has become acutely sensitive to security threats in what it regards as its own backyard (or 'our patch' as Prime Minister John Howard puts it). Within this expanded concept of security, the notion of 'failed' or 'failing' states has become pivotal to the identification of perceived threats and the justification of preventive responses.

The case for intervention in the Solomon Islands set within this broader strategic framework was articulated most clearly by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded think tank, in an influential report, *Our Failing Neighbour*, published in June 2003. Launched by Foreign Minister Downer, the report identifies the Solomon Islands as a failing state and warns of its reversion into 'a kind of post-modern badlands, ruled by criminals and governed by violence' (ASPI 2003: 13). State failure in the Solomon Islands would, according to the report, render it vulnerable to the predatory activities of transnational crime syndicates and possibly even terrorist groups. If left unchecked, such developments would pose a direct threat to Australia's own security interests. The risk of state failure emerges as the new strategic policy framework and is explained as follows:

The phenomenon of state failure represents a spectrum from weak states to states in total collapse. But the security challenges posed by a teetering state are often as grave as those posed by a failed state. Characteristics of state failure include economic deterioration, dramatically falling living standards, declining governance, failing institutions, and an incapacity to deliver services to citizens... Law and order breaks down, the state loses control of armed force, and groups look to their own kind to provide security (ibid.).

Within this framework, the focus is squarely on the catastrophic manifestations of state failure rather than the internal dynamics of failure. Likewise, the resultant security threats are conceived of as primarily those presented by 'failing' states to neighbouring states. The report adopts a regional perspective, noting that while the Solomon Islands' state is closest to the 'total collapse' end of the spectrum, some of its Melanesian neighbours are not that far behind (ibid.: 7). It is clear that PNG is viewed as the next in line in this respect.

#### **Problems with the concept of 'failed state' in the Melanesian context.**

There are difficulties with the concept of 'failed state' and attempts, as in the ASPI report, to apply it to Melanesian countries. Not the least of these is the failure to ground the concept in the particular histories and socio-political contexts of postcolonial Melanesia. It is a model that privileges conceptual neatness over detailed analysis of particular case studies. More generally, the notion of a failed or collapsed

state implies that at one time it functioned effectively, presumably in a manner similar to the 'successful' states of, say, Australia or New Zealand. A cursory reading of colonial and post-independence Solomon Islands or PNG history dispels this assumption. The Melanesian state has never operated effectively in the way the states of Australia and New Zealand have. To put it crudely, the real problem of state in the Solomon Islands, PNG, and Vanuatu, is not so much that it has collapsed or is in danger of collapsing but that it has never been properly built in the first place. We are still talking about the nascent stages of state formation in territories with extremely short experiences of centralised administration, acute levels of internal diversity and fragmentation, and little sense of a common or 'national' identity. The current challenge of state building is not to simply rebuild that which has ostensibly 'collapsed'. To do so might simply be to invite 'failure' further down the track. What is needed is a fundamental rethinking about the kind of state and system of governance appropriate to the unusual circumstances of these countries. The most significant opportunity presented by the new policy climate is to do things differently and that means learning from the mistakes of the past.

#### **How has RAMSI fared so far?**

The intervention has gone extremely well to date, particularly in the areas of disarmament and the restoration of security. By January 2004, approximately 3,800 firearms had been collected by RAMSI and the National Peace Council. As well as homemade weapons, these included a significant proportion of the high-powered guns and ammunition stolen from police armouries during the conflict. Key militia leaders have been arrested and await prosecution on a range of serious offences. A notable early success was the surrender of renegade Weather Coast leader, Harold Keke, within a month of RAMSI's deployment. In its first 200 days, RAMSI made 860 arrests and laid over 1,400 charges.

The Participating Police Force moved quickly on the difficult task of cleansing the ranks of the Solomon Islands police of its militant and criminal members. By February 2004, over 50 police officers had been arrested and charged with 285 offences. Over 400 officers — approximately 25 percent of the workforce — have been removed from the Royal Solomon Islands Police (ABC Pacific Beat 19 Feb. 2004). There has also been progress in the larger task of rebuilding the law and justice sector with strategic assistance to the legal offices,

courts and prison service. Control has been regained over government finances and longer-term governance and economic reforms have commenced. The remarkable turnaround on the security front is testament to the effectiveness of the RAMSI police component. It is also, in no small part, a reflection of the overwhelming support and high levels of cooperation provided by ordinary Solomon Islanders.

### Outstanding Challenges facing RAMSI.

The restoration of law and order in those parts of the country most directly affected by the conflict is a significant achievement. There nevertheless remain significant challenges as RAMSI moves into its second and more ambitious phase with a focus on governance and economic reform. Although popular support remains high, there are some concerns that, unless addressed, could lead to future difficulties. These can be summarised as follows:

- There is a perception among many Solomon Islanders that while RAMSI has moved effectively against the former militants and gunmen, it has not pursued corrupt leaders with the same vigour. Questions are raised regularly in public forums about this apparent failure to move against the so-called 'big fish'. The latter, according to local critics, committed serious crimes and played leading roles in manipulating, and profiting from, the disorder that preceded the intervention. As yet, most remain at liberty and some continue to occupy high offices. This has fuelled the view in some quarters that RAMSI serves as a cloak of legitimacy for leaders, and a government, that have lost the support of many ordinary Solomon Islanders. For its part, RAMSI officials have expressed frustration at the lack of evidence on which to base prosecutions in these cases and have called regularly for members of the public to provide relevant information. Whatever the reasons may be, this perception of an uneven administration of justice could lead to growing levels of popular frustration.

- There also appear to be limited opportunities for ordinary Solomon Islanders to participate in, and influence, the work of RAMSI. This raises broader issues relating to ownership and the scope for local initiative. The scale of RAMSI and the scope of its activities underlie its popular image as the dominant force in post-conflict Solomon Islands. Without the active participation and engagement of Solomon Islanders in the processes of recovery and reform, there is also a real risk that the RAMSI exercise will simply reinforce dependence on external assistance. Solomon Islands' academic, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, points

out that RAMSI's dominance could lead to either a debilitating dependency or, alternatively, a perception of foreign occupation (Kabutaulaka 2004). He notes the common saying '*weitem olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem*' (wait for RAMSI to come and fix it) as an expression of this growing dependency.

- The prominent stance adopted by senior RAMSI and Australian High Commission officials in opposing the Honiara government's award of a pay increase to public servants in January 2004 bordered on political interference and attracted criticism in both the Solomon Islands and Australia (Wielders 2004). There is a thin line between RAMSI's dominant position in post-conflict Solomon Islands and perceptions that it is actually the 'real' government in control of political and economic decision-making. Such perceptions cannot, of course, be resolved by RAMSI alone. There is a clear need for decisive leadership among Solomon Islanders and a much more active participation in the reform process.

- The scope for popular misunderstanding of RAMSI's role and work is very high. Understandings on the street and in the village differ markedly from those expressed in policy documents and official circles. RAMSI has a sophisticated communications strategy, but there is always room for improvement in a country where many people have little access to the media and where rumours are a significant part of daily life. Ensuring that rural villagers are well informed on this matter is a challenging but critical task.

- RAMSI's post-conflict recovery work has understandably focused on key state institutions such as the police and the finance departments. In the longer-term, however, it is critical to also engage with non-state entities that continue to exercise more influence over the daily lives of most citizens than does the Honiara-based state. As Kabutaulaka puts it, 'To achieve sustainable peace and rebuild Solomon Islands there is a need to strengthen both state and non-state entities. This is especially important in a plural society where the state will always share power with other organisations' (ibid.: 2).

- Related to this, is the need to complement state building work with the larger task of nation building in a country where lack of a sense of national identity continues to present major difficulties (Wielders 2004). Such a task cannot be undertaken by the state alone.

- The question of what kind of state is most appropriate to the Solomon Islands' present and future needs is clearly critical. The highly centralised model inherited at independence

is deeply implicated in recent problems. While there are serious flaws in current proposals to establish a federal system, reform of the existing framework of government, in particular, relations between the political centre and island provinces, needs to be prioritised.

- It is also important to ensure adequate levels of consultation and debate about the significant economic and public sector reforms being implemented under the auspices of RAMSI. Reforms that accentuate existing divisions between regions and individuals and that fail to improve access to services and economic opportunities among the bulk of the rural population will lead to growing levels of discontent.

- Finally, there is the obvious question of sustainability. What happens when RAMSI's considerable presence and resources depart? This is a question being asked a lot among Solomon Islanders and some indication of how this issue will be addressed is needed.

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE ENHANCED COOPERATION PROGRAM (ECP)

Australia's Enhanced Cooperation Program in PNG is informed by some of the same considerations as the intervention in the Solomon Islands. Both the manner in which it has been presented and the substance of its provisions reflect Canberra's new approach. PNG is viewed as manifesting many symptoms — particularly lawlessness and economic dysfunction — that if left unchecked might lead to state failure. That, in turn, would render PNG susceptible to transnational crime and terrorism.

Some members of PNG's political elite have expressed reservations about Canberra's new approach and, in particular, have objected to parallels drawn between Papua New Guinea and the 'failing state' in Solomon Islands. Although there are similarities, there are also important differences between the two countries. There has been no armed takeover in Port Moresby or the forcible ousting of a democratically elected government. While the state and key institutions such as the police may be weak, they have certainly not collapsed. Likewise, PNG's well-known law and order problems are not the result of a major internal conflict as occurred on Guadalcanal. PNG has long been the largest single recipient of Australian development assistance and a significant amount of this has been directed at the law and justice sector and, in

particular, the police. Although there have been some improvements, the otherwise disappointing results of fifteen years of Australian aid to the PNG police has been another factor behind the formulation of the ECP.

Australia approached the PNG government with its new proposals in late 2003 and these were agreed to by both governments at the Australia-Papua New Guinea Ministerial Forum in Adelaide in December 2003. The program includes inputs to policing, law and justice, border management (e.g., immigration, customs, transport security), as well as economic and public sector management. The policing component has been costed at \$AU800 million over a five year period and is additional to the existing \$350 million a year Australian aid program to PNG. The main features of the ECP are as follows:

- *Police:* Up to 230 Australian police officers are to be deployed in Port Moresby, Lae, Mt Hagen, and along the Highlands Highway. As well, up to 20 officers are to be deployed in Bougainville. 400 new PNG officers will also be recruited under the program.

- *Law and Justice:* There will be up to eighteen Australians working in non-policing roles in law and justice agencies. Positions will include that of Solicitor-General, three litigation lawyers in the Solicitor-General's Office, five prosecutors in the Public Prosecutor's Office, two Correctional Service Managers, four expatriate judges, as well as further specialists in other key law and justice agencies.

- *Finance:* Up to 36 Australian officials will work in key economic, finance, planning and spending agencies. These will be drawn largely from Australian Departments of Treasury and Finance and Administration.

- *Border Control:* Ten Australian officials will work in PNG's immigration services, border and transport security and management, and aviation security.

While many of the civilian officials are already at work, the deployment of Australian police has been delayed owing to disagreement between Canberra and Port Moresby over their conditions of employment. Canberra has insisted that they be provided with immunity from prosecution under PNG law and Port Moresby has refused to grant blanket immunity. Power plays in the PNG parliament around a possible vote of no confidence against the Somare administration have added to the delay. The impasse over immunity was recently resolved and, subject to the ratification of the new treaty by both Australian and PNG parliaments, Australian police should be in position before the end of 2004.

Many of the concerns raised about RAMSI's post-stabilisation work would apply equally to the ECP. These include:

- Threats of international crime and terrorism in PNG appear to be relatively insignificant compared to more pressing internal challenges. The external security agenda sits uncomfortably with local socio-political realities.

- PNG's 'law and order' problems are complex and diverse. They are not simply the reflection of the weakness of the law and justice system. Many are symptoms of larger processes of social and economic change. While law and justice performance needs to be improved, and the ECP can certainly contribute to this, many other underlying issues need to be addressed before we are likely to witness long-term improvements in the law and order situation. Control measures need to be supplemented by measures addressed at preventing crime and conflict.

- PNG is already engaged in an ambitious program of reform in the law and justice area and it remains unclear how the new assistance program will sit with the domestic reform agenda. There are likely to be difficulties integrating the two.

- The law and justice component of the ECP is highly state-centric, while a major dimension of PNG's National Law and Justice Policy emphasises the need to mobilise and strengthen community-based resources in order to build peace at local levels. There is a real risk that the significant role of non-state entities in the maintenance of peace and good order will simply be ignored.

- How will the economic, and other non-law and justice, assistance provided address the growing levels of impoverishment and marginalisation which contribute to the current law and order problems?

- The large number of Australian officials to be placed in line positions raises familiar issues about long-term sustainability.

socio-economic and political complexities of the recipient countries. Outstanding challenges of governance require sustained engagement and are not susceptible to quick or easy solutions. Many aspects of the fragility of the postcolonial states in the Solomon Islands and PNG reflect their particular histories and the weakness of their articulation with their domestic societies. Current problems cannot simply be attributed to the mendacity of a handful of incompetent or corrupt leaders. Nor can they be resolved through an exclusive focus on strengthening the principal institutions of state. Non-state resources also need to be acknowledged and, where appropriate, mobilised in the larger processes of building state and nation. This requires that greater weight be given to local circumstances, knowledge and expertise. The most difficult challenge of all remains that of long-term sustainability.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In conclusion, Canberra's renewed engagement with its Pacific neighbours is a welcome and timely development. A major window of opportunity has opened. There is a significant role for external assistance in helping address many of the difficulties experienced in parts of the region. The success to date of the Australian-led intervention in the Solomon Islands provides ample evidence of what can be achieved. At the same time, assistance needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Foreign Policy, Governance and Development: Challenges for Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands Conference', 22-23 March 2004 in Madang, PNG. The conference was organised by the Divine Word University in collaboration with the State Society and Governance in Melanesia Project.
- 2 These include Rowan Callick (*Financial Review*), Graham Dobell (ABC) and Mary Louise O'Callaghan (*The Australian*).

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