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WHAT FUTURE FOR THE SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION ?

A view of an Outgoing Secretary-General - Francis Bugotu<sup>1</sup>

This paper was delivered by Mr Francis Bugotu at the Twenty-xith South Pacific Conference held in Papeete, French Polynesia from 3 to 5 November 1986. At that time the Conference agreed to transfer discussion on the subject to the May 1987 CRGA Meeting.

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In the 1965 Lae South Pacific Conference in the Australian Territory of Papua New Guinea, Ratu Mara (now Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara - Prime Minister of Fiji) said, "Unless island countries are asked to contribute to the work of the Commission, I feel that responsibility will be denied them; and they will never act with responsibility until they themselves are paying for what they want." These words were uttered I gathered, out of some disenchantment and frustration with the metropolitan dominated procedures and practices of the original South Pacific Commission, and thus I believe were sown the seeds from which the South Pacific Forum grew.

A similar message was echoed in the 1981 Vila South Pacific Conference by the Prime Minister of Vanuatu, the Honourable Father Walter Lini, when he called for what he termed, "a change in international direction, away from dominance to one that will recognise the concept and reality of interdependence." To be achieved he said, "through what we are able to do for ourselves in a spirit of mutuality and co-operation, generating the will of the people to develop what they have, and freshly tune our services towards enhancing their social and economic conditions in their own environment."

The aspirations expressed above by the leaders of two island governments of today point strongly in the direction of self-reliance which form the basic philosophy and aim of modern SPC and provides the theme of this paper.

In the context of individual member countries of the SPC, it is a call to fight the dependency syndrome and to work for self-reliance and self-respect in our islands. To aim for self-sufficiency although we are aware of course that it would not be possible in the modern world for a country to be completely self-sufficient. The virtue of national and regional pride emanate from self-help and not from self-pity and acquired false comfort and dependency. A child who likes to be mothered all his life will never grow up, imprisoned in a world of dependency derived from paternalistic mentality. An attitude of the colonial past indeed but which is still evident amongst our Island countries today. Our countries need to develop new strategies of approach which could steer us into new directions away from false pride and dependent comfortable living.

On the eve of my departure as Secretary-General of the Commission I should like to feel that my staff and I have tried to set this concept of development as the guiding principle of the Commission's endeavours and we have laboured to inculcate it with practical assistance towards helping island countries to learn to look after themselves. It is my view that if the SPC ceases to be an effective catalyst of development in which

island countries learn to be self-reliant, then it has failed its mandate and should be disbanded.

In my first South Pacific Conference at Pago Pago in October 1982 as head of this organisation, I committed myself into looking closely at SPC's operations "with new and critical eyes". I saw the need for regular evaluation of our work programmes and to promote the use of aid money in assisting development programmes towards self-sufficiency rather than seeing it being used for propping up national luxurious lifestyles and consumption habits. I determined then to pursue the originally declared aim of the organisation, that the thrust of our programmes were to be directed at the 'grass-roots' level, directing services into rural communities whose needs are greater, in "people-oriented projects".

Thus a survey of our activities at SPC during the last 4½ years will show the emphasis placed on country programmes which respond to the specific needs as expressed by island peoples themselves. Our official duty visits have been directed towards this sector and I myself have made a point of visiting all our member countries big and small except Pitcairn. Regular self-evaluation through annual internal reviews of programmes and administrative procedures have been a feature of this period, beginning with the Secretary-General's Internal Review of 1983.

Member countries accepted in Saipan the concept of equal membership status of the Commission to be accorded to all

countries and territorial administrations participating in the South Pacific Conference. The Agreement underscored the acceptance of the self-help spirit as expressed above, and island countries appear to have gained new resolve and will to move forward towards achieving more self-reliance and become more independent in new functions hitherto being performed for them by metropolitan countries. We see for example the growing interest of countries in the development and protection of their fisheries and forest resources, and in the re-discovery of their living cultures and respect for traditional ways of life.

Island countries of the region are indeed looking more closely at themselves, examining and evaluating their own resources and opportunities, and setting their own national priorities and goals. There has been widespread appreciation of the 1983 Review itself. Prime Minister Jacques Chirac of France is the latest to comment and compliment its merit during his recent visit to the French Territory of New Caledonia at the end of last August. He said, "the successes of the South Pacific Commission in fostering Regional Development give us an idea of what can be achieved through trustful co-operation between States and Territories working together on an equal footing for their common prosperity".

"Equal footing" was indeed the case in point advanced in the Review argument which gained popular support. However the essence of the Review's successful outcome derives from the fact that, as a one time Papua New Guinea colleague once

said, the SPC is an "action-oriented" organisation, which concentrates its efforts on non-political/practical matters. As long as this distinction maintains, developmental assistance would continue to be implemented satisfactorily at SPC. However should Island countries aspire not only to have more say in their own affairs, but to direct and control them politically towards the achievement of greater self-reliance, then the concept of "equal footing" will be brought to question and countries will be drawn into discussions involving their own political status and international standing.

At the risk of being misunderstood to be a strong proponent of a single regional organisation (SRO), nevertheless in as much as the issue could affect SPC's future morale and effectiveness I would wish to briefly refer to it in this paper. In doing so, I do not intend to retrace the historical development of the concept during the last ten years and the stalemate situation that has ensued. However, contrary to what many of us might have wished to believe the subject is not dead, and indicates a number of very real differences of outlook apparent in the region between Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia in terms of political aspirations, cultural background practice and attitudes; land and population size and economic potential. The stalemate in resolving the SRO question has shown that any amount of talking about institutional structural re-organisation or merger; legal revision or financial re-allocation will not suffice nor give a satisfactory compromise. A new realistic approach is now needed and the option to pursue in my view is to study and promote self-reliance at individual country level.

The difficulty with the SRO concept does not lie in the ability of the existing organisations to rationalise functions and carry out political commands and mandates, but in the vast differences which exist between countries as alluded to above, and especially in the essential difference between an independent nation and non-independent territories. It is the political leaders who are finding it difficult to make a decision on the issue because of the political sensitivity inherent in the big gap between what an independent nation can do and what a territorial administration is able or unable to do. I believe even the constitutional notion of 'self-government' in this context will be brought to question soon, because those who 'sit on the fence' make it harder for those who have decided to be inside and those countries who are content to remain outside independence to draw honest conclusions..

The vulnerability of our Island countries requires us to be realistic in our aspirations. Good living and foreign life-styles are perhaps one's rights when one can afford them. Flag-raising ceremonies may be attractive and morale boosting but when our small island economies cannot afford such luxuries we have to be realistic and try and do without them in order not to get hurt and feel let down when the aid supply dries up from our donors. You have already heard me relay this message to you elsewhere during this Conference as this reality affects our organisation at this time, striking some of our popular programmes out of our books.

In the light of the above scenario of events and issues what future role is there for SPC? In the Secretariat's paper

SPCONF.26 (WP.9) in which the agenda contents for future SPC Conferences is discussed, we have traced the background evolution of the Conference to its present position and status. The full control of SPC by member countries is in fact very recent, and the emphasis has remained although greatly enhanced, in the area of practical assistance aimed at the grassroots level.

The increasing effectiveness and thoroughness of the work of the CRGA has meant that matters which were previously considered and debated in detail by the Conference have over recent years been dealt with by technical meetings and the CRGA. This has relieved the Conference of the tedium of details that it traditionally had to wade through. It appears thus paradoxical that the success of the Secretariat in enhancing the effectiveness of the CRGA so as to streamline the agenda of the Conference and further reduce its duration in order to attract attendance by political leaders who cannot afford to spend too much time in meetings, has now led to doubts about the future of the Conference.

Compared with its sister regional organisations, SPC is unique in being the only body which brings together on an annual and regular basis, representatives of all countries and territories within the region. The Conference is the supreme decision-making body of SPC whereas SPEC and FFA have the South Pacific Forum as their ultimate decision-making body. These facts have direct bearing on the levels of representation at the Conference on the one hand and at the Forum on the other. Since the South Pacific Forum is recognised as the foremost political authority within the region, comprising Heads of Governments of

independent and self-governing countries, SPC and FFA Secretariats would draw much prestige from their association with it. SPC would not enjoy such privilege, but at the same time it should not make prestige its concern.

The exclusion of political discussions in the Conference has given SPC the strength and freedom to be an effective technical assistance organisation unique in the region, attracting the best and most experienced and competent expertise available. It has already gained this reputation and should continue to develop this level of technical and practical assistance and not venture into the political arena which should be the preserve of the Forum. SPC will therefore become the tool of self-reliance which is what our countries really need to be truly independent. It is therefore conceivable in this scenario of a role for SPC, that representation at the South Pacific Conference might adequately suffice at an official level.

In the wake of SPC's 40th anniversary of the signing of the Canberra Agreement (6 February 1947) I submit these thoughts to the honourable Conference.

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