

A Reflection on Solomon Island Politics

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The Rt. Rev'd Terry Brown
Bishop of Malaita, Church of Melanesia

Thank you for your invitation to present this paper. I am very pleased to be here. I look forward to your responses to my comments. Please do not regard them as definitive in any major way. They are simply impressions. I shall present my paper in three parts: first some assumptions, then some challenges, finally, some signs of hope.

A. Some assumptions

(1) The Sogavare government is the legitimately and democratically elected government of the Solomon Islands. The national election was generally well conducted and fair; the process of electing the Prime Minister from among the Members of Parliament was difficult and certainly highly political. But ultimately it too was democratic, whatever the motives of all involved. Therefore, there is no reason for Australia or any other nation to try to pull strings to topple the Sogavare government, no matter how objectionably or bizarrely it behaves. I say this because there is often the impression in the Solomons that since the Australian government worked so hard to keep the Kemakeza government in power, despite all the signals that it had lost the faith of the Solomon Islands people (including the churches) because of its corruption, therefore, the converse must also be true, that Australia is somehow working to bring down the Sogavare government. Australia ought to "play it straight" as much as possible and deal with the present Solomon Islands Government on equal terms. For example, it is not clear to me why, with the Australian Government refusing visits from Solomon Islands Government Ministers, the Leader of the Solomon Islands Opposition is in Canberra talking with Foreign Affairs. I hope they did not pay his airfare. The Australian Government, through its High Commissioner in Honiara, and any other officials, should avoid direct involvement in the internal politics of the Solomons. It is this Australian tinkering with Solomon Islands politics that has caused a great deal of difficulties.

(2) There are corrupt and criminal types in both the Government and Opposition. Likewise there are those with links to the militant movements in both Government and Opposition. Likewise, there are politicians of honesty and conscience in both the Government and the Opposition. Presently the Opposition is very weak because they are saddled with Kemakeza and Rini (both former Prime Ministers) and others with criminal and militant links or records of corruption. No one wants them to come back into power. Always following power, other criminal and militant types have moved over to the Government; some of them are facing court cases this very week if not this very moment. It is tempting to say or think, if only we could pick the best people out of both Government and Opposition (a kind of "All Star Team") and have them run the country it would be much better. But that is for the Solomon Islands people to do through the electoral process; it is not for us as outsiders to try to manipulate.

(3) Political loyalty (and personal loyalty -- I am not sure they are different) is based on shared history, family ties, friendship, repayment of obligations, self-protection and the opportunities of the moment, rather than ideological agreement, common morality, or even the views of others more powerful than oneself. This rather un-European view of loyalty, which puts the personal above the political, is I am sure, partly behind the "Moti Affair". This

style of loyalty has both disadvantages and advantages -- on the one hand, instability with too much trust put in the hands of the wrong people because of a kind of blind loyalty to them. On the other hand, there is flexibility, and the ability to change sides very quickly when things go wrong. Therefore, it is not unusual to hear government MPs comment quietly that they will abandon the Prime Minister if his behaviour becomes too objectionable.

(4) The Regional Assistance to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has been more a positive influence than a negative one, but there are problems and flaws in its operations. For anyone (such as myself) who lived on the ground through the very difficult years 1999-2001, where the country was effectively in the hands of armed thugs and corrupt and ineffective politicians, the present situation is a definite improvement, indeed, it offers a certain level of stability compared with those years. I hope that in future years, no one will romanticize the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) or the renegade members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) who amongst themselves operated not only in Guadalcanal, Malaita and Western Provinces, but also (occasionally) in Makira, Central Island and Ysabel Provinces, and not just in urban areas, but down to the most local level, often against the interests of ordinary village people. Provinces that I have not mentioned (for example, Temotu) were also deeply affected by what happened on the Guadalcanal Plains where their people were employed on the oil palm plantations and terrorized. At least as an emergency measure, to keep the Solomons from turning into complete anarchy and mayhem, RAMSI was a success.

However, as has become obvious, there are now many problems, from all sorts of reasons -- for example, RAMSI's large size and expense, its complex make-up, with some of its mandates apparently having more to do with Australian than Solomon Islands or even Pacific concerns, its lack of flexibility, its unclear relationship with normal diplomatic ties and aid programmes, its "bubble culture" (living inside a "cultural bubble") and a general difficulty of all concerned to identify and address directly, holistically and practically the root causes of the Solomon Islands crisis.

As a result, some (sometimes many) of the RAMSI programs and activities now seem to run contrary to their original goals. For example, one goal of RAMSI was the de-militarization of the Solomons, through the collecting of all guns in the country. I suppose this has been about 95% successful, though there are still guns in North Malaita (and, of course, other things to be violent with, such as knives and stones). Yet, the continued presence of fully uniformed and armed RAMSI soldiers in peaceful and quite incongruous situations (virtually doing nothing *except* being uniformed and armed) represents a level of militarization (and a waste of the Australian tax payers' dollars) beyond anything in the ethnic tension period. From the responses of many senior RAMSI officials (military, police, civilian) who have visited Auki, one sometimes has the impression that RAMSI policy for the next few years is still not really thought out very well.

B. Some Challenges

(1) I think the biggest challenge at the moment is to prevent the recurrence of violence on Guadalcanal. On the one side, Honiara has become even more of a Malaita enclave on Guadalcanal, ever pushing out onto Guadalcanal customary land; the large young male population in Honiara is largely Malaitan and unemployed; criminal activity in Honiara is on the rise, for example, with the Burns Creek gangs which caused so much trouble at the end of last year and now criminal gangs' setting up roadblocks at the Lungga River bridge to rob taxis and buses at night, with little interference from the police, who always seem to arrive very late. On the other side are increasingly dissatisfied Guadalcanal people, seeing their

customary land disappearing to Malaitans and Chinese; the presence of many migrants from the Guadalcanal Weathercoast who walk across the island to settle on and harvest the former RIPEL cocoa plantations east of Honiara; reports of the resumption of IFM training at Kakabona west of Honiara and talk of an IFM attack on Parliament; and the perception (having some truth) that the Sogavare government is a kind of Western-Malaita-Makira-Temotu alliance and Guadalcanal is disregarded. The situation is not helped by the many rumours that spread around Honiara, some of them quite fantastic, for example, that RAMSI is training the Guadalcanal militants to fight against the Malaitans (which, of course, does not help RAMSI's reputation in Honiara). Nor does the Prime Minister's former close association with the Malaita Eagle Force in the post-coup government help. Guadalcanal is becoming a tinderbox and I wonder if RAMSI has a strategy if armed conflict breaks out again on Guadalcanal. They did not do especially well with the Honiara riots. The Commission on Guadalcanal land issues is one that should go forward before all the others but the Government seems to lack the will to act. Nor does the Government (or RAMSI or aid donors, for that matter) seem to be addressing the problem of unemployed youth in Honiara or the chronic underdevelopment of Guadalcanal. The Government's emphasis on "bottom up" rural development, which has much to say for it, risks ignoring the Achilles heel of Honiara and Guadalcanal.

(2) Environmental destruction of the Solomons is going ahead at full pace, especially in the logging and fishing sectors. There would appear to be almost 100% consensus that logging has been going on for some years and continues to go on at unsustainable levels. The Government itself admits this. Yet, there is no political will to follow Vanuatu and ban round-log export. There is simply too much money flowing into the government from logging, both over and under the table. Up and down Malaita, the loggers (mostly Malaysian) come in and, working in 24-hour shifts, can remove all the timber in an area in a week. As all the labourers and machinery come in the ship and they work so quickly, there is no thought given to such things as labour permits. Nor is the provincial government necessarily informed, so they do not collect their fees. The operations are shrouded in mystery and it is not clear that the Ministry of Natural Resources even knows what is happening. There are no environmental assessments. There is no monitoring of boundaries of areas logged. Recently some of our parishioners in Olumburi, East Are Are had to blockade a logging road to prevent the loggers from going onto their land, which they had not authorized for logging. There is much opposition to logging amongst local people but those in Honiara who organize and supervise the operations know who has to sign on the dotted line and usually manage to get that chief to sign. Parents, desperate that their children have an education, agree to logging simply to pay secondary or tertiary school fees.

Similarly, exploitation of the ocean continues. Here the country's close relation with Taiwan does not help. By all accounts, there is both underestimation of catches and poaching by vessels fishing unauthorized in Solomon Islands waters, though my impression is that there is a bit more will on this issue, as the government is beginning to realize just how much money it is losing. In both these cases, one wishes aid donors could be a bit more proactive in offering the Solomons some assistance. Logging, especially, needs to cool off, and more attention paid to local milling and enterprises that add value to the timber, rather than round log export. Some of the logs exported are very small, which suggests there is more and more clear-cutting. Similarly, damage to the reefs in the Western Province from mud-swelled rivers (the trees now gone) is increasing. I know some assistance is being given to help monitor foreign fishing in Solomon Islands waters but I am not sure how effectively this is working.

(3) The former RAMSI Coordinator, James Batley, commented on one of his visits to Auki a couple years ago that it was the economic sustainability of the Solomons that kept him awake

at night. Much of that sustainability depends on the country's managing its natural resources in a creative and sustainable way, as I have already mentioned. There is also the elimination of corruption, especially in the government and business sectors. The current high level of corruption is relatively new and, indeed, came in largely with the Asian loggers and their bribes and with the Mamaloni government. The government will always hope for at least some mega-development projects (such as the re-opening of the gold mine) which will produce large government income. The real need, however, is economic development that will provide additional cash for rural and urban families to supplement (but not replace) subsistence agriculture. The problem, of course, is the temptation to mix the "mega" and the "micro", which, if done poorly produces little cash income for rural people and also takes away the wealth of the subsistence economy. (The Aluta Bay Oil Palm Project in east Malaita is a case in point.) In theory, I think the Solomon Islands government is on the right track in giving priority to rural economic development but whether they and aid donors have really thought it through is not so clear. The improvements in infrastructure (especially roads, bridges and wharfs) that are going on are important. I would think it would be important to give support to small-scale family agriculture and manufacturing enterprises, including diversified agriculture, coconut oil production, increased cocoa production, timber milling, fish processing, etc. – in short, anything that adds value to the Solomons' rich natural resources. In some respects, the Vanuatu economy performs better than that of the Solomons, partly because of the tourism sector and the existence of alternative exports (beef and kava) to round logs and timber. The Solomon Islands government and aid donors seem incapable of doing the simplest things to increase income from tourism, for example, building an attractive domestic air terminal in the Solomons and a domestic airline that flies more than one or two planes very irregularly. There is always the hope for the quick fix – discovery of diamonds or gold on Malaita, nickel on Ysabel, etc., rather than the slow and modest changes that would contribute to economic prosperity. The government is also trying to tackle the Chinese dominance of the economy through the encouragement of indigenous business endeavours. However, some local business people have records of criminal and militant activity, so one has the impression that the Chinese community is feeling under some threat (except those with special links to the government); the failure to re-develop Chinatown after the riots is a case in point. However, as previous governments were very much in the hands of the Chinese to the detriment of the country, it remains difficult to reach a middle ground where Chinese work in partnership rather than dominate or be dominated.

(4) A fourth challenge is what I would simply call social development, particularly in the areas of health and education. The Solomon Islands population continues to expand very rapidly. As a bishop, I visit the rural areas very frequently. Two things stand out: the larger number of women in rural areas over the number of men (the men are in Honiara or elsewhere seeking employment and income) and the very large number of children. As in any poor society, especially where infant and childhood mortality remains high (and, indeed, where many women and children continue to die in childbirth), a large number of children remain an insurance policy, and if there is only one boy or one girl, there is the fear that if that child dies, there will be no one to replace him or her. Medical care remains poor in rural areas and even in the national referral hospitals – few doctors, clinics without staff, shortage of drugs, trained nurse aides who cannot find work, new clinics without housing therefore without staff, etc. While there has been some improvement in infrastructure, it is not coordinated. For example, AusAID builds clinics but “does not do housing”, so there are one or two brand new clinics in rural Malaita without staff because no house has been provided. Likewise, the national government's budget for medical services seems inadequate, so that nurse aide graduates, for example, cannot find work.

For example, partly supported by the government, we run a diocesan rural health care centre, Fauabu, serving a catchment area of 20,000 people. It is a most discouraging business: shortage of staff and no money available for operating expenses, housing or capital development. Both government and aid donors require that we go through the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for any support; no support comes. Two years ago a New Zealand volunteer in our national government referral hospital's accounting department resigned and went home early to NZ to protest the hospital's financial mismanagement. Of course, when I raise the matter of medical services with visiting RAMSI officials, the answer is "Sorry, RAMSI doesn't do medicine". One only wished that RAMSI and the Australian government would pay the same attention and spend to the same high level on medical institutions as they do on new prisons. We have a new state-of-the-art prison being built in Auki, complete with housing for all the staff. It is this view of RAMSI that makes people uncomfortable – its emphasis on policing, courts, prisons (all of which, of course, are important) over against medical care, education and rural economic development. There seems to be something wrong that with millions and millions spent to bring in and support RAMSI in the country, there is still no basic health care in rural areas.

Likewise, the country's educational system remains in some shambles. The high school fees mean that many children simply drop out of school at the end of grade 6 or grade 9 (form 3). But even when they pay the school fees, the quality of education is poor. Honiara High School has 90 students to the classroom. Rural community high schools are without proper classrooms, libraries and equipment. Teachers' pay is very low. The Solomon Islands College of High Education (SICHE) is a disaster. On the simplest level, staff in the teachers' training programme do not go out to assess recent graduates to enable them to move from probationary to permanent status, so new teachers are kept on probationary pay for years, causing much unhappiness. The new government has tackled the issue of "ghost teachers" but in a drastic way that saw all staff on fixed term appointments removed from the payroll; as a result some schools have not reopened. Politicians, of course, find ways to send their own children overseas or place them in elite schools. Nor does non-formal education get good support from the government. To their credit, various aid donors (New Zealand, Australia, EU, etc.) have been making operating grants to government and church schools to keep them running – these go directly to the schools, not through the government or ministry – yet even here, despite much training, retiring of imprests remains a problem. (The Church of Melanesia is hoping to work towards the establishing of a university to address some of these issues; but it is not at all clear that we will have the support of the government, as there is probably the fear that we might divert money and students that should be coming to Solomon Islands College of High Education (SICHE). Because students and their families generally cannot afford tertiary education, both SICHE and the University of the South Pacific offer many short courses for smaller amounts of money; but my impression is that these are highly superficial. Because so many students lack secondary education but want further training, tertiary institutions offer preparatory or pre-preparatory courses – again, expensive and not very effective. Because of the Solomons' failure in secondary education, just about every educational institution in the country (university, rural training centre, religious community, theological college, computer school, etc.) is transformed into a quasi-secondary school sooner or later.

(5) A fifth challenge, very much having to do with the future withdrawal of RAMSI (no matter how many years hence) is building a police and judiciary structure that can operate honestly and effectively on its own without massive help from outside. RAMSI has done much work in this area, including the training of many new police, upgrading the training of serving police officers, building and repairing police stations and court houses and introducing new awareness programmes around particular criminal issues such as family

violence and sexual abuse. However, the shift from emergency mode (providing on-line police or even advisors from overseas, providing judges and prosecution and defence lawyers from overseas, providing military units from overseas, providing helicopters and fast boats from overseas, etc.) to long-term stable indigenous mode (a locally owned and operated police and judiciary that can work effectively on its own and be trusted by the people) is happening more slowly than one would like. To put it simply, the two major issues are infrastructure and human resource development.

For the police, the infrastructure problems are housing and transport. While hundreds of new police have been trained, there is no housing for them in the provinces or even Honiara. Many simply are living with their families. Recently, the Atori police station in east Malaita was closed when the Department of Health condemned its housing as unsafe and unsanitary. (RAMSI police can, of course, move in to any place and set up a containerized police station as they did at Atoifi. It is these external initiatives that muddy the water.) Likewise, many police stations are without transport, although, of course, RAMSI police do have transport (trucks, boats helicopters). Nothing has changed much from earlier times. One rings the police about a case; they reply that we can handle it if you provide the transport. My truck not only serves the church but also functions as police vehicle and ambulance in Auki; indeed, I even partly house some police families too, students who cannot work in their fathers' substandard housing. As one who has sometimes sought financial assistance from overseas, one thing I can tell you is that no aid donor likes to contribute to vehicles or housing. However, without assistance in these areas, I do not see how the police will be able to function in the future. Many police in Auki live in a literal swamp and it is no wonder they are discouraged. It is curious that when it comes to build new prisons, prison staff housing funds are available immediately. But housing money is not available to prevent crime or prevent or even treat sickness.

On the human resource side, RAMSI has put much money into training and upgrading the police. However, this training needs to be much more specialized (for example, detective work, interviewing witnesses, writing reports, preparing cases for prosecution) and involving larger numbers. There are also many police ready to retire who are staying on, blocking the advancement of those behind them. Again, it is an issue of money. Who will pay their legally and contractually sanctioned gratuities? Aid donors are not interested in gratuities; it is seen as money down the drain; and since the government's budget is heavily dependent on outside funding, the item does not appear there either. So these redundant staffs stay on, sometimes doing very little, because their employment is budgeted for, even if their retirement is not. On the judiciary side, much more could be done in the training of local lawyers to serve in all capacities in the judiciary. There is the widespread impression that RAMSI has passed over local legal talent and continually hired from outside; this simply cannot go on.

Incidentally, expatriate RAMSI judges, compared to local judges, have the reputation for being much more rigorous in quality of evidence required (something local prosecutors have difficulty keeping up with), therefore, dismissing cases that on the surface would seem to be water-tight; but when they do convict they give bigger sentences than the local judges. As witnesses are often still frightened to come forward to testify in court in the Solomons, one can see some problems here – for example, local prosecutors and witnesses who are absolutely certain about who is guilty but who just give up when expatriate judges refuse to convict on technicalities as argued by expatriate defense lawyers. Likewise, the same dynamic sometimes results in people being released on bail who never should be.

Another more immediate challenge to the judiciary is the enormous backlog of cases, resulting in people being held in prison now for years without being tried, such that this is

now becoming a human rights issue. Remand in the Solomons is for only two weeks, so the courts are also clogged with remand hearings, further delaying the proper trials. If some of these cases eventually result in innocent verdicts, I think one will begin to see lawsuits against the government and even RAMSI for wrongful imprisonment. There was recently a Rove Prison hunger strike on this issue and RAMSI and the Solomon Islands judiciary say they are responding.

C. Some Hopes

As much of what I have been talking about may seem a bit depressing, I want to end with some signs (or even more than signs) of hope.

(1) Over the past ten years, there has been an enormous leap in political consciousness of the general population of the country. Unlike Vanuatu, the Solomons did not go through any kind of struggle for its independence. There was a certain political naiveté. I think that is gone. The “ethnic tension” conflict on Guadalcanal and its aftermath, the exposure of corrupt politicians, the downward spiral of the economy and social life, greater awareness of violence in the home, more regional and international awareness, the new media age of internet, etc., have all contributed to a people much more politically aware and involved. There is no political apathy in the Solomons. Interest and activity is rather all over the map, perhaps both legal and illegal at times, but Solomon Islanders are becoming thinking political people. Some decry the large number of candidates in elections but I think it is a good sign. The voting rate in rural areas is very high, usually over 80% and the Honiara rate is low only because people go home to vote. The smallest activities of politicians are scrutinized and discussed.

I think this is a characteristic of a state that is emerging out of a period of violence and instability and has acquired some peace. (I have just come from a church conference in Singapore. One of the participants was from Liberia which, of course, went through a terribly violent period. But the country finally has peace under an honest leader – and the result is that people’s expectations have been raised and they have become very critical of politicians and other institutions that are not performing well. His description reminded me of the Solomons a bit. Even Mr. Sogavare, despite his eccentricities, is a politician in this sense: the earthquakes and tsunami forced him to make peace with RAMSI and Australia (at least for a bit) as only they could deliver the relief that he needed, both for people’s welfare and his political survival. The emergence of groups such as Transparency International, the political statements of the labour unions, the re-emergence of the Civil Society movement, ongoing statement of church leaders and groups, letters to the editor, etc. are all a part of this hopeful sign.

(2) Related to this increased political consciousness is the Solomon Islands’ vibrant media – the press, the radio (both AM and FM) and, most recently, locally produced television, including local TV news. Even during the “ethnic tension” period, the press tried valiantly to maintain its independence, sometimes becoming the target of violence. New newspapers emerge. People are increasingly accessing news on the internet. The media is quite wide in whose views they display. For example, virtually any ordinary citizen can issue a media release and it has a good chance of appearing somewhere in the media. The government has tried to harness the media energy by setting up a government media office but I think all realize that it has become a propaganda arm of the government and the media treats it as just one voice among many. I think there is some potential threats to the media, for example, the government’s cutting off of funding to Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation earlier this year (SIBC countered by refusing to broadcast Parliament meetings and some money was then forthcoming) and by Julian Moti and others threatening the media and Opposition with

defamation of character lawsuits for just reporting the news. But, on the whole, I think the Solomon Islands media is a bright spot.

(3) The Solomon Islands people, cultures and churches remain a rich resource, greatly under-appreciated by many. (I remember a conversation with a RAMSI policeman in Malu'u, North Malaita, a few years ago. I asked him what he thought of the situation he found himself in. His comment: "These people won't change until they get rid of their culture." It is curious that we condemn 19th century European missionaries for cultural imperialism yet some [not all] 21st century secular RAMSI policemen have exactly the same attitude.) The Solomon Islands people are a resource deeply interested in education and training, wanting to make a contribution to their country. They have not been served well by their governments and institutions. But they remain full of interest and hope and I would encourage you and the institutions you represent to help develop this great resource. There is also widespread recognition that we do not want to go back to the terrible time of near-civil war. So there are many who are interested in participating in programmes of peace and reconciliation. Here I think a Peace and Reconciliation Commission has a place, but in the hands of the churches and genuinely impartial people, rather than the politicians, so many of whom were directly involved as participants in the conflict in one way or another.

(4) Finally, I think the aid donors and RAMSI principals are learning from the situation they have found themselves in for the last five years. For example, the Community Services Programme (CSP) of AusAID is setting up a church desk in its Honiara office, to deal directly with the churches as civil society and providers of service, recognizing that the churches in the Solomons are the primary organization of civil society and primary NGO in the country. (Of course, the churches also have to be careful in how they handle this.) Likewise, on the issue of the police, I think RAMSI is clearly realizing that they must work out a viable transition and put much more money and programme into addressing *all* the issues, including police training, morale, housing and transport. Similarly, I think there is increasing recognition that if there is to be a RAMSI military presence, they have to do something constructive, not just parade around with uniform and gun. Or better, they are deciding that their military should go home when not needed. All the infrastructure development that is going on is also recognition that one cannot have rural development without at least some good roads and wharfs.

While I have ended on a positive note, I think one must not forget the challenges, or even the assumptions that I have started with that others may not share. I hope any discussion this afternoon can contribute to the continued growth and stability of a country and people that has so much to offer to each other and to the world. Thank you.