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# Pacific Solutions? The Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme as a Symbol of Australian Relations with the Pacific Islands

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*The announcement of the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme in August 2008 was welcomed throughout the Pacific region as much for its symbolic message of Australia's willingness to engage with the nations of the Pacific as for the economic assistance it would provide. In the twelve months since its announcement, however, progress towards its implementation has been slow, especially in the largest of the Pacific nations, Papua New Guinea. This paper examines some of the reasons for the welcome that was extended to the Scheme and looks in some detail at how it has been received in Papua New Guinea. It concludes by expressing the concern that the Scheme may fail due to the continuing problems in administration and management that have beset the region in the past.*

## Introduction

The Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme was announced by the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Stephen Smith, before the meeting of Pacific Forum leaders in Niue in August 2008. It envisaged that as many as 2,500 Pacific Islanders, from Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu, would participate in a pilot seasonal work program in Australia over three years. At the end of the pilot, the scheme would be evaluated with a view to expanding it to help fill the gap in employment in Australia's horticultural sector (Smith 2008).

Reaction to the scheme's announcement was very positive from Pacific Island nations: at least, from those which had been included as members of the pilot program. Others, which had missed out, were not dismissive of the scheme's intent, however, merely their failure to be included in it. The general sense was that at last Australia was doing something constructive. In following the lead of New Zealand and other developed nations outside of the region, it was seen as responding to the lobbying and promotion of the concept that had been under way for some years (see for example Maclellan and Mares 2006; Hayward-Jones 2008, 2). This paper will examine some of the reasons for this favourable response, and will examine in some detail the scheme's impact in Papua New Guinea, the largest of the Pacific Island states, before concluding on a note of some concern about its future implementation.

## Symbolism: Australia in the Region

Income from remittances has played an important role in the economies of Pacific island states for some time, in

common with many other developing nations. For some, it has been vital: in 2005, remittances accounted for 40% of Tonga's GDP, and 15% of that of Kiribati (Browne and Mineshima 2007, 12). However, as important as the income from remittances can be, the reason for the favourable response to the Australian scheme transcends the purely economic. It has been welcomed as much for its symbolism as for any other reason, as a further sign of the warming of Australia's relations with its Pacific neighbours. Such a softening of approach, it is felt, may mean the door will eventually open to longer term settlement, study, or work opportunities for the region's peoples, that will go some way towards addressing problems of economic uncertainty and environmental threat.

Beginning with the election of the Rudd government in November 2007, there has been an overt and deliberate policy of rapprochement with the region's small island nations. The rhetoric of policy has shifted from caution over 'failing states' to a constructive building of partnerships. This was articulated in the *Port Moresby Declaration* of March 2008, in which Rudd set out his government's vision (Rudd 2008). The Declaration acknowledged the problems afflicting the region, particularly in meeting the *Millennium Development Goals*. It emphasised, however, that the path to their solution would lie in a cooperative approach characterised by mutual respect and responsibility. In this it differed markedly from the dismissive approach contained in the 2003 foreign policy white paper, *Advancing the National Interest*, which declared that 'Australia cannot presume to fix the problems of the South Pacific countries' (DFAT 2003, 93). The main vehicle for the new cooperative approach would be the Pacific Partnerships for Development. So

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the scheme's introduction has been viewed as a sign of Australia's willingness to engage with the region. Perhaps it would be better to say 're-engage', however, as the history of Australia's previous relationships with the island states has not been forgotten in the Pacific, even if it may have been in this country.

There is not room in this article to recount this history, and there is a body of literature on various facets of the relationship between Australia and the Pacific, which can be looked at for further information. In particular, there is a substantial literature on the subject of the nineteenth century labour trade (see for example Moore 1989 or more recently, Banivanua Mar 2007). But it is important to note that the activities of the labour trade, the subsequent introduction of the White Australia policy, and the years of colonial or semi-colonial administration remain part of how Australia is depicted in our region (Broinowski 2003). The introduction of the seasonal work scheme is being understood as another step in this lengthy history. It is appreciated for its symbolic message.

### Responses in the Pacific

The approach of Pacific states to the prospect of the *Seasonal Work Scheme*, as noted earlier, has been generally welcoming. In the smaller island states of Kiribati and Tonga, with a well-established system of external work and a historical dependence on remittances, the scheme has been treated unexceptionally. The memorandum of understanding between Tonga and Australia, to set up the implementation arrangements, was signed on 28 November 2008. It was made clear that the Australian scheme would differ from the existing arrangement with New Zealand (in that Tongans who had participated in the New Zealand scheme would be ineligible). In April of 2009, before the effects of the global financial crisis caused their relocation to Munduberra, the first group of 50 Tongans who were working at the time at Robinvale were 'earning good money and sending remittances back to their families', according to a member of Tonga's parliament (*Matangi Tonga* 2009).

In Kiribati, which also signed the memorandum on 28 November, care was exercised again to differentiate the scheme from the New Zealand exercise. This had received some criticism arising from complaints over little work and pay and poor living conditions. In fact, thirteen of the seventy I-Kiribati participants had disappeared while in New Zealand (*Radio New Zealand International*, 2008). In Vanuatu, the country's Finance Minister, Willie Jimmy, said that being selected as one of the participating nations was a big achievement for his country: 'I thank the Australian government', he said, calling the inclusion a 'long awaited dream come true for the people of Vanuatu' (ABC 2008). His country

also signed the memorandum of understanding on 28 November.

The people of Tuvalu were perhaps understandably unhappy about being overlooked when its neighbour, Kiribati, was included in the scheme. Kelesoma Saloa, Tuvalu's acting Foreign Affairs Secretary, said on hearing the news that 'we are just hoping, we can't really force any country to take us on board; we are just requesting if possible to give us a chance' (ABC 2008). Even Timor-Leste was hopeful that the pilot might be allowed to incorporate some of its people, although these hopes were quickly dashed (ABC 2008).

While the small island states of Kiribati, Tonga, and Vanuatu have been able to respond reasonably quickly and smoothly to the scheme's initial stages, the situation in PNG has been rather more complex. There are demographic, economic, and political factors that have contributed to its slow take-up. If care is not taken these may lead to its eventual failure.

### Papua New Guinea: A More Complex Case

The reason for the scheme's embrace in the region mentioned earlier – its symbolism as a marker of Australia's willingness to engage – holds truer in PNG than perhaps anywhere else in the Pacific. One only needs to see the lengthy period of colonial occupation by Australians, and the shared enterprise that led to PNG's independence at the end of this time in 1975, to understand something of the ties that many Papua New Guineans continue to feel with Australia. Bringing matters up to the present, Australia is a constant cultural and economic presence on the Papua New Guinean landscape. The close, even fanatical interest shown by many in the annual Australian State-of-Origin rugby league series is a strong testament to this.

The Papua New Guinean Government commenced lobbying for a scheme in April 2008, shortly after the meeting that led to the Port Moresby Declaration. It is highly significant that its first mentioned goal was 'to revive the diminishing people to people relations between [the Papua New Guinean and Australian] people'. The focus of the scheme was to be on rural people and communities, not least 'to reduce urban drift' (Abal 2009, 41).

By June, though, there were some real doubts over whether Papua New Guinea would be included in the scheme which had begun to be discussed in the public arena. Although nothing overt was said to suggest that this might be the case, suspicion mounted both in PNG and in Australia. The country's High Commissioner, Charles Lepani worried that leaving Papua New Guinea out of the scheme would be a 'blow to relations between the countries', even 'a tragedy' (*Post-Courier* 16 June

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2008, 9). His concerns were echoed by Keith Jackson, at the time president of the PNG Association of Australia, representing Australians who had ties with its former territory. Jackson remarked that, given the Australian effort to repair its bilateral relationship with Papua New Guinea, 'it would be a deep irony indeed' if the exclusion of PNG was to 'plunge the relationship into a state of disrepair' (*Post-Courier* 6 August 2008, 9).

In the days immediately before the announcement was to be made, Jackson received advice from the office of the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Duncan Kerr, which he believed gave a strong hint that PNG would be overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Selection of the countries to be involved, Jackson was told, 'should not be misread as reflecting the state of bilateral relations'.<sup>2</sup> He took this piece of diplomatic-speak to mean rejection (*The National* 18 August 2008).

I was in Port Moresby at the time, just before the Niue meeting. The talk in the newspapers and around the campus of the University was that the country would indeed be excluded from the pilot project. Assuming the worst, many saw being left out as yet another put-down by the Australian Government. They saw it as akin to the 2005 incident when Prime Minister Somare was made to remove his shoes when going through the security barrier at Brisbane airport. This incident, regarded in Australia as something trivial—even comic—in nature, caused deeply felt offence on the streets of Port Moresby, where Australian and other expatriates were advised to stay in their hotel rooms for fear of retaliation. It was, an Australian observer noted, seen as 'symptomatic of an attitude to which they are very sensitive ... you're on your knees, you're weak, we're powerful, you take it' (Modjeska 2005). So it was with the potential exclusion from the seasonal work program.

One young Papua New Guinean told me that,

There are whisperings and rumours that PNG is not going to be part of that project. This does not reflect a warm and close relationship. I mean, one thing the Australian people have to realise is that we are a proud people, Papua New Guineans. We have land. We are not interested in going and setting up overseas somewhere. We'd like to go out, learn as much as we can, come back and impart what we've learned with our own people. You have no fear of us overstaying (personal communication).

When, however, Papua New Guinean inclusion was announced, political leaders were effusive in praise and thanks. Foreign minister Sam Abalsaw it as 'a vote of

confidence in the country's younger generation' (*Post-Courier* 21 August 2008, 7), while Somare described the decision as 'most welcoming' and one that showed Australia's willingness to 'engage more meaningfully with Pacific Island Governments' (*Post-Courier* 22 August 2008, 6). While expressing some caution about the terms of employment, the General Secretary of Papua New Guinea's Amalgamated General Workers Union, Andrew Kandeskasi, said of the scheme that 'it was in the right direction', and that 'PNG gains a lot from it' (ABC 2008).

It only took a matter of days before the first attempts to cash in on the announcement. Showing the level of enthusiasm widely felt for the scheme, within a week more than 800 young people had registered their interest with the Lae-based Melanesian Chamber of Commerce. Each of them had given a non-refundable deposit of fifty Kina, thereby providing the Chamber and the Australian company with which it was working with a totally illegal windfall of PGK 40,000 (*The National* 25 August 2008). The Australian High Commissioner, Chris Moraitis, rushed in to emphasise that these goings-on had nothing to do with the official pilot scheme, the arrangements for which were a long way from being determined.

Unfortunately for the scheme and for the hundreds and thousands of Papua New Guineans who have showed interest in it, the vacuum of news concerning its final structure has continued, almost to the present day. The opportunity to sign a memorandum of understanding with the Australian government in November last year was passed up by PNG, and in December Minister Abal was still cautiously questioning whether more should be learned from the New Zealand experience before going ahead and committing to the Australian scheme (*Post-Courier* 9 December 2008, 19). The other three countries involved, he said, had experience with the New Zealand program and hence were able to adapt quickly to the scheme; this was not the case with Papua New Guinea. Notwithstanding this, 'PNG's preparations for participation in the Australian pilot scheme are at an advanced stage', he told reporters in January of this year, anticipating that the memorandum would be signed at the next PNG/Australia Ministerial Forum, set to take place in June (*Post-Courier* 23 January 2009, 3).

The Forum came and went in Brisbane, with a short note welcoming progress made on arrangements for Papua New Guinean participation, and at the time of writing, the technical aspects of the arrangement are still being reviewed by the PNG National Executive Council.

Despite the uncertainty, enough of the scheme's arrangements on the ground in PNG have been promulgated to allow an appreciation of what it might look



like. It is by now commonly understood that the scheme will entail a total of between 600 and 800 Papua New Guineans, the first 200 of whom are very optimistically expected to arrive in Australia in October or November. As the 'technical aspects' are still to be confirmed, no recruiting agents or employers have been identified and Papua New Guineans are being warned to be cautious of any attempts to do so without authority. It is probably fair to say, though, that a certain sense of ennui has set in, as the original high level of enthusiasm generated for the scheme has been strangled in red tape. There is real concern that despite the good intentions and the powerful symbolism expressed by PNG's inclusion in the scheme, it will all go awry, thanks to the 'usual suspects' that bedevil public administration in the country. As a well-placed colleague in Port Moresby told me recently, 'auspac wokwokschem I buga up!' (personal communication).

### Conclusion: Storm Clouds Ahead?

From the Pacific perspective, the establishment of the seasonal work scheme is on the whole a positive development in terms of relations with Australia, economic benefit, and social cohesion. In common with developing states the world over, Pacific island nations look to remittances for much-needed income, and this is especially so in some countries including Tonga, Samoa and Kiribati. In the face of continuing global financial turmoil this source of funds becomes even more important.

However, a stronger reason for the welcome extended to the scheme has been its significance as a mark of Australia's willingness to engage in a mutually responsive manner with the region. There are strong reasons of historical association that underpin this, but even more importantly, an engaged Australia will, it is hoped, be more likely to be there to assist Pacific island states as they face severe economic and environmental challenges. The social and cultural side-effects of this scheme are acknowledged; but by concentrating on rural young people it is intended to both increase the wealth returning to the villages and provide business opportunities in these rural communities.

Notwithstanding all of the above, there is a grave danger that the pilot scheme could be derailed by, on the one hand, the kind of administrative mismanagement sceptics were always concerned about, and on the other, the impact of the global financial crisis in Australia. If it proves not to be a success, the *Pacific Seasonal Worker Scheme* will join the ranks of other encounters between Australia and the Pacific that have marked our long history of association.

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### Aunty Jane was a fallen woman, my family said

Her washing line  
held just one dress,  
almost dry, blowing  
large pink flowers  
blending to the garden.

It couldn't have fitted her for years,  
its waist tiny tight folds that somehow  
the wash hadn't taken the mould from,  
Grace Kelly-like it limps  
and from the crossbeam in the turf shed,  
her hair whitened blonde, her face purpled green,  
we cut her down,  
her two nephews.  
We cut her down.

NOEL KING,  
CLASH, CO KERRY,  
IRELAND

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