a $25 million loan to fund compensation commitments. This disappeared almost immediately into the pockets of the politicians. In 2002, the country hit rock bottom: with no funds left to distribute, the conflict changed from a guerrilla war to a kind of pervasive criminality. The state, it is safe to say, had failed.

One of the main themes to emerge from Fraenkel’s account of this sorry saga is the recurrent, cyclical aspect of the conflict’s evolution. Reading the detailed description of the way one short-lived local peace deal after another was convened for the purposes of distributing such ‘customary’ compensation, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the conflict was itself increasingly fuelled by this perverse peace dividend. In essence, the Solomon Islands state became a giant piggy-bank to be ransacked for increasingly exorbitant payouts to politicians and their supporters, serving only to propagate further conflict. Before long, compensation had become extortion, fuelled by the inability of the country’s bureaucracy to reign in the apparently boundless greed and shortsightedness of its political elite. The state began to eat itself.

The circuit-breaker in this downward spiral was the Australia-led military intervention of 2003 restoring basic law and order and may yet succeed in rebuilding the apparatus of the Solomon Islands state. The book concludes with an account of the change in Australian policy that presaged the RAMSI intervention. Here it is less successful, as the author moves from providing episodic accounts of the conflict to opining on the merits or otherwise of Australian foreign policy. Berating what he sees as ‘that ignorance of the socio-political situation in the Pacific Islands that pervades Canberra’s corridors of power’, Fraenkel tilts at a range of windmills: think-tanks, policy-wonks, academics who use African analogies, even ‘offensive’ depictions of the Pacific as Australia’s ‘backyard’. This sometimes self-indulgent critique is an unnecessary distraction from the book’s main theme.

Overall, this is a good work of historical narrative, and one that I would recommend to anyone searching for a solid account of the Solomon Islands conflict and its aftermath. It is a well-researched, well-argued and well-written piece of contemporary history. What it does not do is answer the deeper question of what caused the Solomon Islands conflict to occur in the first place. After all, the basic factors advanced to explain the conflict—ethnic differences, a rent-seeking political culture, customary demands for compensation and venal political leaders—have long been present both in Solomon Islands itself, and indeed in Melanesia as a whole. As such, they cannot present a satisfactory account of why the conflict occurred in the manner, time and place that it did there, but not elsewhere. Those seeking to understand the deeper, structural roots of the conflict must therefore keep searching.

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South Pacific Futures: Oceania toward 2050


In South Pacific Futures, Van Fossen groups theorisers about the long-term future of the South Pacific into five categories. ‘Globalists’ take into account world economic trends and either conclude that the South Pacific will conform to these trends and become modestly prosperous, or claim that it will fail to take advantage of globalisation and ‘fall into a doomsday nightmare of overpopulation, poverty, and social breakdown’. ‘Oceanians’
believe a neo-traditional regional culture can make Pacific islanders ‘more self-determining, positive and empowered’. ‘Dependentists’ emphasise the Pacific’s ‘dependent, peripheral’ position in the world and their ensuing exploitation by ‘global markets’. New Zealand ‘MIRABers’ see the Pacific microstates as perpetual beggars dependent on migrant remittances and aid. And ‘Asianisers’ consider that in the future the Pacific islands will become dependencies of new Asian powers.

The book uses these categories to examine Pacific population trends, the environment, economies, politics, aid, information technology, media and culture and tourism. A concluding chapter summaries the ‘futures’ indicated in the sectoral discussions. Extensive references include a wide range of forecasts, but are sparse on the analysis of actual past economic, social and political trends in the Pacific. Indigenous Pacific writers and others who have contributed analytical articles to the Pacific Economic Bulletin that are contestable because they are related to actual developments are thus ill-represented in the material surveyed.

Van Fossen also based his conclusions on two Foundation for Development Cooperation conferences where academic beachcombers who have spent their professional lives among the incredible natural wealth and beauty of the South Pacific lamented its alleged geographic isolation, smallness and diversity to argue that the islands can not develop mainstream economies. They foresee that Australian and New Zealand taxpayers will therefore have to subsidise the islands through official and non-government aid forever.

The book is fact free. Three tables provide minimal information on population, areas of land and sea and, oddly, access to ‘basic voice telecommunications’. The population projections to 2050 are not given in ranges but as single numbers that must be, to say the least, taken with a large pinch of salt. The dates for 20 per cent of the population having ‘access to ‘basic voice telecommunications’ are even more curious. For Nauru, for example, Van Fossen claims in a technology-defying forecast that such an outcome is ‘unattainable’!

The book lacks any connection with the reality of the South Pacific. There is no indication of long-term economic stagnation, underlined by continuing excess of population growth over GNP growth. Van Fossen does not mention that even with record primary product prices the South Pacific’s abysmal economic performance has not been dented in recent years. There are no social indicators and no analysis of political dysfunction that is making the South Pacific a notorious headquarters for such international sleaze as pornography sites.

As Van Fossen does not relate the relationship of the five categories of forecasts to their authors’ analyses of past trends, he and his readers have no base for evaluating the forecasts. Notably, he ignores the 1990s debate about the likely outcomes of economic and social policies then in place. Rowan Callick and the other authors of the ‘2010’ project predicted stagnation with all its miseries if policies did not change (Callick 1993). This ‘globalisation’ view was ridiculed as being unduly pessimistic and doomsdayish by Oceanians, notably by Greg Fry (1997). As the year 2010 approaches, it is clear that the ‘2010’ project underestimated the dismal outcomes produced by the economic and social policies of the 1990s that persist to this day.

Van Fossen is a true postmodernist, giving equal value to all forecast texts. Clearly, in his view, all is opinion and there is no way of distinguishing among opinions. In Van Fossen’s postmodern world, economic and social outcomes are not the result of government policies. Governments
have no responsibility for unemployment, low incomes and the misery of high mortality rates, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and crime. It is thus strange to read that Beris Gwynne, the Executive Director of The Foundation for Development Cooperation (who presumably organised the writing of the book and the conferences on which it was based), hoped in her foreword that ‘this publication will contribute to broader and better understanding of the issues facing our South Pacific neighbours, adding impetus to recent positive developments in the region’. The Foundation, as well as the author, appears to be living in a Panglossian world where the continuing reality of impoverished lives in the South Pacific does not exist.

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References


Westminster Legacies: democracy and responsible government in Asia and the Pacific


This new collection of essays examines the process of policy transfer associated with the spread of Westminster-derived forms of parliamentary government in the Asia Pacific region. The book promises much during this time of growing demand for analysis and advice about preferred forms of democratisation. Is there a ‘Westminster path’ to democratisation and, if so, what political, social or cultural preconditions can reinforce success? There are no easy or simplistic answers: there is no one overpowering norm and no single form of a ‘Westminster system’. Indeed, one great virtue of this collection is to show ‘Westminster’ under modification from a wide range of non-British political cultures: Islam in Malaysia; military rule in Pakistan; ‘customary’ rule in Papua New Guinea and Fiji; monarchy in Nepal; single party statism in Singapore; biculturalism in New Zealand; and (perhaps surprisingly) federalism in Australia. Across this diversity of regime types, one element of classic ‘Westminster’ seems common and possibly fundamental: sharing of executive power between leaders of a ruling political party and a subordinate career bureaucracy.

The terms ‘Westminster model’ and ‘Westminster system’ are surprisingly resilient in social science, despite many attempts to debunk these terms as persistently misleading. Former ANU political scientist Robert Parker was one of many policy analysts who subjected the ‘Westminster model’ to rigorous examination, warning that many if not most Westminster-derived systems of parliamentary government depart