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THE PACIFIC IS CORE BUSINESS

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*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

“Betio is politicising”

Makeshift dwellings are tightly packed into what little land exists. Amidst these homes wind tight, dirt lanes the width of a car. This is a place of dense human existence. Space on a coral atoll is in short supply.

There is rubbish strewn around liberally. It is clear the battle for effective waste management was lost a long time ago. Plumbing is sporadic. The electricity supply looks like it has been hooked up with ingenuity, but safety ... not so much.

And then you see a set of steps descending into a dark concrete space. Whatever this is, the sense is of ruin. And yet it's clear someone lives in there. The unmistakable stench of a human living without a toilet surrounds the entrance. That a person could be left with this dark hole in the ground, in the middle of such a despairing landscape, as a choice to lay their head at night deeply challenges your understanding of the ways life on this earth can be led.

I've seen refugee camps in Africa, slums in Bangladesh. But the worst human circumstances I've ever witnessed are here on the islet of Betio in South Tarawa, Kiribati.

And yet the biggest development assistance partner in the country is Australia. The most significant relationship Kiribati has with any nation is not China nor America: it is with us. Indeed Kiribati's currency is the Australian Dollar.

So why is it that the plight of Betio – its overcrowding, its challenges with health, its existential battle against the effects of climate change – is not a glaring part of the landscape which ought to be instinctively understood by every Member of Parliament and every person within our foreign and security policy community?

And yet it is not. Among the many issues that matter in our lives it appears this is not one of them.

But there was a time when Betio mattered greatly. It was at the centre of the greatest global struggle in history.

74 years ago to this day the Battle of Tarawa saw the single biggest beach landing of World War II up to that point. The lessons learned there would be applied at Normandy within a year. Over four horrific days of conflict almost 6,400 people would die in a struggle to take Betio, which was being used by the Japanese as an air base. Four Congressional Medals of Honor would be won there: three of them posthumously. And a documentary "*With the Marines at Tarawa*", on the way to winning an Academy Award, would shock homeland America for the first time about the true horrors of the War.

Today on Betio there are still reminders of the Battle: rusted landing craft in the lagoon, a wreck of a tank in the village, and the dilapidated concrete bunkers which now provide the saddest of homes.

To see Betio is politicising. It asks many questions. And in the process it demands one simple answer in clear and indefatigable terms.

Betio was worth fighting for then. And in a very different way Australia needs to fight for Betio, and indeed all of the Pacific, now.

"[A]n Australian holding pattern policy in the Pacific"

Australia has a significant presence in the Pacific. We are easily the largest donor providing \$1.1 billion in assistance this year. We have far and away the largest diplomatic footprint in the region with resident missions in 10 of the 15 other Pacific Island Forum nations as well as consulates in Noumea and Hawaii.

In addition to our deep defence relationship with New Zealand we have large Defence Cooperation Programs with the other militaries in the region – PNG, Fiji and Tonga – which in each case is the largest defence assistance these nations receive. The Pacific Patrol Boat Program provides at least one vessel to all the Pacific Island Forum nations except obviously New Zealand, Niue, and Nauru.

The PACER Plus trade agreement provides trade on favourable terms to the Pacific. The Seasonal Worker Program offers opportunities for persons in the region to access the Australian labour market.

Make no mistake: Australia commits resources to the Pacific.

Yet for all this there is no strategy or guiding philosophy about our role in the Pacific other than a general sense of obligation about providing help. To be sure, help is important, but it is not enough.

Our relationship with the Pacific actually operates under a separate provision of the Constitution.

Sub-section 51(xxix) of the Constitution furnishes the Commonwealth with powers in relation to “*external affairs*”. This is the well known foreign policy head of power. Less well known is Sub-section 51(xxx) which provides the Commonwealth with powers regarding “*the relations of the Commonwealth with the islands of the Pacific*”.

As long ago as the 1890s when the Constitution was being framed, it was understood that our relationship with the Pacific was special. Yet the significance of the Pacific then warranting its own head of constitutional power is hardly reflected by its place in the thinking of Australian foreign and security policy now. While the main game is our relationship with the United States or China, the Pacific is relegated to a sort of niche area well behind South East Asia, or for that matter, Europe and the Middle East.

Indeed you would be hard pressed to find a parliamentarian who wouldn't offer a view about Israel, Palestine and a two state solution. It certainly is a critical issue. Anyone with even a passing interest in international relations will be thinking about it. But it is quite a long way from Australia. And we are hardly the most important nation in its resolution.

At the same time, in any given Federal Cabinet over the last 40 years only a handful of ministers would have been able to articulate the concerns and challenges facing Papua New Guinea right on our doorstep. And yet the very creation of that nation involved Australian Cabinet decision making.

This sense of place – or rather the lack of it – that the Pacific holds in our world view is not limited to the political class. Too many DFAT graduates dream of an initial European posting. It is the minority who chase an opportunity in the Pacific. Our media outlets have correspondents around the world including in the United States, Europe, China, Japan and Africa. And yet today only the ABC maintains one journalist in Port Moresby and that is the sum total of the Australian media contingent in the Pacific beyond New Zealand.

Even our voice to the region, Radio Australia, was switched off with little or no notice given to many of the Pacific islands. And at the people-to-people level, less and less Australians are getting a taste for the region as cheap flights mean they can now choose Asia and beyond for their holidays.

In my experience the considerable resource commitment on the one hand and yet the lack of vision and debate on the other has led to an Australian holding pattern policy in the Pacific.

Australia should be able to articulate a direction and a way forward for the Pacific and yet we don't.

“[T]he Pacific matters to us”

The need to take the Pacific out of a holding pattern and to develop a strategy is first and foremost because the Pacific matters to us.

It is our most immediate neighbourhood.

PNG, a country of nearly 7 million people, is right on our doorstep ... literally. The *Torres Strait Treaty* enables a free movement of locals across the Torres Strait for traditional activities including fishing such that there are some Papua New Guineans living in the Western Province who effectively commute to work each day to Boigu Island in Australia.

Cairns is an important part of life for senior figures in PNG involving frequent visits for pleasure and increasingly for business. Advance Cairns, a regional advocacy body, identifies building the relationship with PNG as one of the key economic opportunities for Far North Queensland.

For Melanesia and southern Micronesia, Brisbane is the principal transport hub. Regional leaders are constantly passing through on their way to the wider world. And even Polynesia, via New Zealand, has a significant connection to Australia which is evidenced by the growing communities in Sydney and Brisbane.

The Pacific is key to our national security. The significant war history in the region ought to provide a clue to that.

PNG is of course home to Kokoda and Milne Bay, among other battle sites. The pilgrimages to these places are at least one way in which the profile of PNG in Australia has enjoyed an upswing. The Bomana War Cemetery is the largest Australian War Cemetery in the world, with almost 4,000 Australian defence force personnel buried there. This alone makes this sacred ground for our country.

The Battle of Guadalcanal, fought principally by the US Marines happened in Solomon Islands. And as I have mentioned, in addition to Tarawa, other parts of Micronesia were the scene of conflict during the Second World War.

To this day the US military still has a number of strategic bases in Micronesia including Guam and Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

In a more contemporary sense instability in the countries would have and has had a huge bearing on our national security. We have seen major Australian defence commitments made to Bougainville and Solomon Islands in the last 20 years in addition to our commitment to East Timor. These have resulted in Australian casualties and billions of dollars of expenditure. In the case of Bougainville, thousands of Bougainvillians lost their lives in the bloodiest conflict in the Pacific since World War II.

There remain a worryingly large number of small arms throughout PNG, a country which suffers from major law and order issues.

While democracy throughout the Pacific has been a strength, military coups in Fiji over the last three decades remind us that it cannot be taken for granted.

By virtue of the Pacific, Australia is the First World country which is surrounded by the most developing countries, all of whom face challenges and need help.

By reference to all the social indicators described in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals such as: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; gender equality; child mortality; maternal health; and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases – the Pacific is a part of the world which faces huge struggles. Accordingly they rightly are the major focus of our development assistance.

The Pacific is a massive piece of global territory.

Its ecological significance and its economic potential are enormous. Establishing the right balance between these two tensions needs the active and smart stewardship of countries with resources and capability.

Most importantly the Pacific is that part of the world in which our influence matters the greatest. What we say and do in the Pacific carries enormous weight. In many instances our influence is determinative.

Our influence derives from being a First World economy of relative size located within the region. We have both a significant military history and a significant governance history in the region, with two countries – Papua New Guinea and Nauru – having gained their independence from us.

Critically, the countries of the Pacific expect us to lead. They supported us fully when we sought a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Far from being concerned that Australia might be overbearing, what the Pacific Island nations fear most is a lack of attention from Australia. The appetite and desire for Australia to play its role – with empathy and intelligence – is manifest. And when we don't, or when we don't uphold our responsibility to speak with a Pacific voice as has been the case on climate change in recent years, our reputation suffers.

“The Pacific ... is our global calling card”

The expectation of the Pacific Island Countries for us to lead is matched by the expectations of the world.

Across the very broad bilateral relationship that we enjoy with the United States, mostly and understandably, it is America that takes the lead. They are a global superpower. We are not.

Yet in one area the US unambiguously follows us: the Pacific.

It is therefore the one opportunity we have across the entirety of the relationship to demonstrate Australia as a leader. In this sense the Pacific is not only important in its own terms, but it also goes to the heart of the most important bilateral relationship that we have.

This is true not only in relation to the US, but also in respect to the world at large. The Pacific, whether we understand it or not, is our global calling card. And rightly we will be judged for good or for ill based on what we do or do not do in the Pacific.

Our behaviour toward the Pacific is central to our international reputation.

It is for this reason that we must stop seeing the Pacific as a niche area of our foreign and security policy. Precisely because the Pacific goes to our key relationships with the likes of the United States and China, it is as centrally important to our world view as is the United States and China.

“[T]he Pacific is not travelling that well”

And given the progress of the Pacific is so important to how we are viewed, it is important to be clear eyed in our assessment about that progress.

The fact is the Pacific is not travelling that well.

It performed the worst of any region against the Millennium Development Goals.

In 2015, Africa as whole was on track to attain three of the eight Millennium Development Goals (universal primary education, gender equality and combatting HIV/AIDS and other diseases). The same cannot be said of the Pacific, where only two countries (Cook Islands and Niue) achieved all the Millennium Development Goals and three countries (Kiribati, PNG and Solomon Islands) did not achieve any.

In the 2015 Progress Chart, Northern Africa showed poor progress or deterioration against two measures in the Millennium Development Goals, whereas Oceania showed poor progress or deterioration in five measures. Northern Africa was shown to be on target or have made excellent progress against seven measures compared to just one for the Oceania region.

As a relative measure of development between the year 2000 and 2015 this shows the Pacific as the slowest developing region of the world. It suggests that in the not too distant future Africa will overtake the Pacific in development leaving the Pacific as the least developed region in the world.

From health, to education, to law and order, to the empowerment of women, the Pacific needs help and business as usual is clearly not acceptable.

The Pacific is on the frontline of climate change.

An intrinsic feature of small island nations is that economies are narrow. They are heavily reliant on tourism, agriculture and aquaculture, which means the natural environment. As this changes and is threatened so too are livelihoods based upon it. And with very little manufacturing to compensate, the impact on economies can be devastating.

The situation is even more acute in the coral atoll nations of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands. For countries that consist of thin strips of land only a few metres above sea level, climate change is an existential issue. Its impact is happening now. And Bill Shorten and Tanya Plibersek saw this for themselves when we visited the Marshall Islands and Kiribati in the lead-up to the Paris climate conference in 2015.

Sea level rises have the potential to make entire atolls uninhabitable. But well prior to that point, the security of water supply will be critically threatened.

In Tuvalu the water supply is rainwater captured in tanks. This works based on a highly predictable pattern of rain in a tropical climate. But at the end of 2011 just a small change in rainfall created a water crisis as water supplies reduced to just a couple of days. Small changes in weather patterns had a major impact.

Similarly in Tarawa, more than half of the ground water supply is now spoilt. During big storms the water lens becomes brackish. While there is a natural process that flushes out the brackish water, the frequency of storms has made it impossible for this to fully happen.

An age old local custom is to welcome dignitaries by having them drink from the local well. At Eita Maneaba this custom is performed as a welcome to the country itself. It is where important visitors receive a traditional welcome to Kiribati. Sadly the well at Eita Maneaba is spoiled meaning the ceremony is now conducted using a coconut.

I've witnessed this ceremony on many occasions. It is centuries old. And when I first learned about the use of the coconut instead of the well it felt as poignant an example of the effects of climate change as any I'd seen.

Perhaps most significantly is the impact on the psyche of these countries. For each of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, the sea has historically been a source of sustenance and security. But now this source of security has become a source of threat. And the resulting reality, that each of these countries faces the possibility as to whether they will exist within the lifetime of the current generation, has a massive impact on people's happiness in the here and now.

The poor pace of development combined with the threats posed by climate change provide a worrying assessment of the Pacific. And this assessment reflects upon us. The world will rightly hold Australia to account for our development assistance efforts and our advocacy, or lack of it, in respect of climate change.

“[W]e ... have an obligation to make a pledge to the Pacific”

In considering our actions in the Pacific often I feel there is an instinct not to act in the manner of an overbearing colonial power; to proceed on the basis of a light touch.

This sentiment is well motivated, but it is wrong. And moreover it risks becoming an excuse for inaction.

In my experience a sensitivity about a perception of Australia being overbearing could not be more misplaced. Indeed the perception is the opposite. Governments in the Pacific want Australia to pay some attention. And this is more than simply wanting action on the part of the Government of Australia: it is also about wanting airtime in the Australian public discourse.

I genuinely believe that among the countries of the region there is an appetite for Australian leadership. Accordingly while we have no right and nor would we ever seek to impose our plans on the Pacific, we should have an obligation to make a pledge to the Pacific – to lead a Pacific discussion.

There are two ideas which I believe could be the cornerstone for developing a pledge which may be the basis of a discussion with the Pacific Island Countries.

The first is a far more extensive and deeper defence relationship with those countries which have a defence force.

Australia is the beneficiary of a deep defence relationship with the United States. At any point in time hundreds of Australian defence force personnel are embedded within the US Armed Forces. They are given opportunities which could never be had within the ADF. They develop skills and capabilities which in turn empower the ADF when they come home. Some operate at a very high level within the chain of command, bringing back a well-developed sense of how the defence force of our major ally operates.

A version of the opportunities we derive from this defence relationship with the US could be provided by us to the defence forces of the Pacific. In the same way we derive a benefit from the US, the Pacific Island Countries could derive a benefit from us. And just as it suits the US to have a more capable Australian Defence Force, so too it would benefit us to see the capability of the Pacific Island Countries' defence forces grow.

Already we do much in this space.

Many in the officer ranks of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces have had extensive training in Australia. The links are very strong.

The Pacific Patrol Boat Program – which provides both vessels and Royal Australian Navy Maritime Surveillance Advisors – is the only maritime capability that some Pacific Island Countries have. It is a huge commitment which is gratefully received and provides assets and builds skills.

But rather than seeing these efforts as a role already performed, we should see them instead as a guide to how much further down this path we could go. And the important point to understand is that it is actually in our national interest to walk this path as far as the Pacific Island Countries are willing to walk it with us.

The more capable, the more professional, the more interoperable these forces are with our own, the more stable these countries will be and the better chance development is given to flourish.

The second is looking at ways in which Australia could extend its government action to assist the functions of government in the Pacific.

For many small island states in the Pacific the sorts of functions of government which we take for granted in Australia can only be performed if effort is aggregated with other small island states.

The provision of tertiary education is an example. For most Pacific Island States, on their own, running a public university is far beyond the capacity of any single government. But together a number of the countries of the Pacific have banded together to run the University of the South Pacific, which is a multinational public university.

The aggregation of government service delivery is part of the global small island state story, for it is a feature of how small island states operate in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean as well.

An extension of this concept is Australia using its government service delivery to perform functions for the Pacific Island Countries. We do this in a small way now. The airspace above Nauru is managed by Air Services Australia and income derived from it is used to maintain the airport on Nauru. Similarly the High Court of Nauru is the High Court of Australia.

Provided this is done sensitively and offered on a basis which completely empowers the Pacific Island Countries – it can only ever occur if the nations themselves want it to occur – then the scope for this assistance is enormous. It could make a huge difference to the development of these countries particularly in respect of deriving a proper benefit from their chief asset: their maritime Exclusive Economic Zones.

Our assistance would be our pledge to be the best friend that we possibly can be.

In terms of articulating Australia's pledge to the Pacific: a step change in our defence cooperation, and Australian pledges for shared government service delivery is a place to start.

“[A] way forward for the Pacific ... would ... have a profound impact on Australia's strategic circumstances”

The consequences of developing a way forward for the Pacific is vital in terms of the wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific but it would also have a profound impact on Australia's strategic circumstances.

It would greatly improve our national security framework. It would be the natural and necessary extension of: our active participation as a good global citizen within the United Nations; our Alliance with the United States; and our defence cooperation with the countries of South East and East Asia. It would be the active promotion of security within the region where we lead.

To be clear, previous efforts such as those in Solomon Islands and Bougainville have been very important and Australian security policy at its best. But whereas those were reactive in nature, this would seek to proactively create a better security environment in the spirit of prevention being better than a cure.

Demonstrating that Australia is actively thinking about the future of the Pacific and developing ideas for improving it can only help in encouraging the US to be a part of the Indo-Pacific for the long term.

While I believe that reports of an American retreat from East Asia are very premature, it is clearly in Australia's national interest that the US remain and so measures which encourage the US to stay matter.

America's alliances in East Asia help root the US in our region. Australia is key among these. We are already dependable, reliable and pull our weight. This is critical. But so too is demonstrating that in Australia, the US has a partner willing to lead and willing to share the burden of developing strategy for the region.

Making a pledge to the Pacific would also let the rest of the world know that we are serious about our responsibilities in the Pacific and mean to be present.

Pacific Island Countries have choices about with whom they partner. That we will always be the partner of choice is not a proposition we can take for granted. The country that cares the most will have the biggest impact.

A Pacific pledge would demonstrate that that country is Australia.

“[T]he Pacific is the biggest blind spot in Australia's national security policy”

Our failure to embrace our leadership role in the Pacific is the biggest blind spot in Australia's national security policy.

Why don't we eagerly lead where we are expected to lead?

There are 10 countries whose principal relationship in the world is with Australia. For those of us who are interested in the national security and foreign policy space why can't we name those countries as a matter of reflex?

To me it speaks to a bigger issue. Our sense of national mission needs to be enhanced.

We are a well-liked, competent, friendly country that plays its part in the world. It is an enviable basis for our international relations. But who we are and what we are on about are questions rarely asked and rarely answered.

While our indigenous population has millennia of history behind it, the New World immigrant country that characterises much of Australia today does not. We do not have the history of Britain or France which is central to their national missions. Nor have we ever had an independence movement like the US or for that matter the countries of the Pacific. Our becoming a nation during the Second World War did not yield a national discussion which we can look back to in order to illuminate a national mission.

And so as a New World country which never had an independence movement we are left with some thinking still to do.

The absence of this thought is not to say we have security policy all wrong. Far from it. Nor is it to say that engaging in it will lead to a security policy revolution. It won't.

But it is to say that without this thinking we have some blind spots. And engaging in it would help to illuminate them such as the role we need to play in the Pacific.

Acting as a leader in the Pacific, and articulating why, will help promote that discussion and stimulate that thinking.

It would correct a deficiency in our national security policy. And it would represent a maturing of our nationhood.