I first met Brij Lal in 1982 when he was my lecturer in Pacific history at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Brij had been a student himself at the same university in the early 1970s and he told me once that some of his best friends were from the Solomons. He mentioned one in particular, Edward Masika from Malaita, who was a good soccer player. I cannot say whether Brij is a good soccer player or not. However, one skill and talent that he possesses, and to which all of us can attest, is his exceptional writing ability. It is this particular skill that I would like to dwell on here. In many respects, Brij played a major part in building up my confidence in English writing, though I still have a long way to go to reach his level.

I was in my final year of undergraduate studies at USP in 1982. Solomon Islands achieved Independence a few years earlier in 1978 and there were only 20 or so USP graduates from the Solomons by 1981. I was therefore under pressure from my government to successfully complete my studies and return home to assist in the civil service. I was also under considerable self-imposed pressure due to my involvement in numerous student activities on campus. It was the final semester, and we were told to undertake research on a topic of interest to us. There was no coursework, no assignments and there was no final exam. We were told to carry out our own research and present our findings in a final paper that was to be presented to Brij. It was a very interesting but challenging exercise.
The paper was due for submission on the Friday of the first week of November. Of the 25 or so students in the class, I was the only straggler. I went to see Brij that Friday to explain that I had not even started writing up my paper as I had been so tied up with student matters, and so requested an extension of time to Monday of the new week. Brij was visibly displeased but understood my situation and agreed to my request, warning that he would wait for me in his office on Monday. If I was late, then I was told not to bother handing in my paper, which meant that I had would fail the course and not graduate at the end of the year.

I worked my guts out over the weekend, and by Sunday night I was only midway through the piles of papers and sorting out my writings into a coherent approach. There were no computers, laptops and mobile phones back then and so all our essays were handwritten. I was quite worried but kept saying to myself ‘it is now or never’. I must admit too that as a Christian I prayed for strength. I stayed up the whole night of Sunday without going to bed. With minutes to spare, I completed my paper, and had no time to read it through. Brij’s office was a 15-minute walk from my accommodation so I ran as quickly as I could and managed to catch him at 9 am—just as he was walking out of his office, as he said he would do. I begged him to accept my paper, which he did with a becoming reluctance, telling me that I was the only one left.

Two weeks later, we went to class to receive the results. Brij handed out all the papers one by one and commented on each of them. I felt a lot of butterflies in my stomach when one after another student received their results, but not me. The suspense was unbearable. Finally, all the students got their papers, except myself. I held my breath but noticed that there was still one paper left on his table. He told the students that I was the last to hand in my assignment. I thought he was going to scold me. Instead, he informed the students that my paper was the best in the class. I smiled and felt satisfied with the result. Brij did not stop there. He encouraged me to polish up the paper and have it published. This paper was eventually published by USP’s Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS).

After graduation in 1982, I was sent by Ron Crocombe (the Professor of Pacific Studies at USP) to the University of Melbourne to spend a few weeks with Professor Greg Denning. The main purpose of my time with Greg was to plan the writing of a history book on Solomon Islands that would provide ‘insider’ or indigenous perspectives. This book was
published as *Ples Blong Iumi: Solomon Islands, the Past Four Thousand Years* (Alasia 1989). I am sure Brij had a hand in recommending me to Ron Crocombe.

I served in the civil service for six years before entering the Solomons’ parliament in 1989, soon after *Ples Blong Iumi* was published. While still a Member of Parliament in 1997, I received an invitation and spent six weeks with a State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) project at ANU. The SSGM had started a year earlier under the leadership of David Hegarty. I was one of the first Pacific Islanders to do a paper at the SSGM and Brij again had a hand in the invitation. I published a discussion paper with the SSGM on *Party Politics and Government in Solomon Islands* (Alasia 1997).

In 1999, I had asked Ron Crocombe for advice regarding my interest to pursue further studies at Master’s degree level. Crocombe’s advice to me was that in view of my publishing record, I can ‘jump over’ the Master’s degree and instead pursue a PhD. This advice remained with me for about a decade.

In 2008, I had left parliament and was again invited to SSGM, during which time I had the opportunity to fully discuss with Brij my interest in pursuing doctoral studies at ANU. Without hesitation, Brij took me to see the head of the Department of History in the School of Culture, History and Language. After some discussions, I was given the green light.

Subsequently, in 2012, I resigned my post in the Prime Minister’s office and fulfilled my long-term ambition to pursue doctoral studies at ANU in Canberra. Brij was there not only for me but for quite a number of Pacific Islanders whom he had supervised. As the chair of my supervisory panel, he was at times hard on me but I know that this was for my benefit. Incidentally, I was Brij’s last PhD student. With his retirement and my own need to return to the Pacific Islands, I have applied to transfer my candidature to the University of the South Pacific. I am determined not to let him down.

I can testify that having been in employment for about 30 years and to become a student again is no easy task. It is at this juncture that I would like to sincerely thank Brij who has been a pillar of strength in my days at ANU. This was even made much more difficult because I was staying alone with no family members in Canberra. I shared many of my difficulties with Brij, who understood my situation very well because he is
a Pacific Islander himself. He knows how we feel. He is patient, humble and simple. I could not have asked for a better supervisor and mentor than Brij. He ranks amongst the top supervisors of any university. Brij is my wantok and I shall cherish his many words of advice and encouragement. Enjoy your well-earned retirement with your family and *tagio tu mas*.

**Glossary**

*Wantok* — we are from the same locality, country, or region. It is a form of identity.

*Tagio tu mas* — a pidgin derivative for “Thank you very much”.

**References**


