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‘Of exits and entrances’

In dialogue with Doug Munro

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances.

— William Shakespeare¹

What follows is the result of a series of email exchanges between Doug Munro and myself between September and November 2017. It provides the opportunity to elaborate on my valedictory lecture at The Australian National University in February 2016 (which I light-heartedly called my ‘Extinguished lecture’—Chapter 23 in this volume). In the lead-up, several colleagues made suggestions as to the subjects I might broach, some of which were included in my lecture. Those that I could not include, or at least not as fully as I would have liked, were put aside for later consideration, as were a number comments after the lecture. The present contribution, written in retirement, is my response to them. I thank colleagues and friends who made suggestions and apologise if my responses do not fully address their concerns. And, as always, my deep gratitude to Doug for a 40-year friendship and fruitful working relationship.

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander, (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951, reprint 1980), pp. 254–83, 2.7.140, 141.

DM: You have said often enough that your journey from a remote, sugarcane-growing village of Tabia on the island of Vanua Levu to the top of your profession has been an improbable one. It reminds me of a statement in the computer-animated film *Ratatouille* (2007) that ‘Not everyone can be a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere’.² What made your journey possible? Can you account for the success you have had in your career?

BL: It is impossible to be certain about these things as there are so many intangible, even unknown, factors to consider, and I am not sure I can do justice to the question. To start with, though, I suppose you will have to take a certain amount of native talent for granted, but that by itself is not sufficient because I know many talented people who have not done well and many not-so-talented people who have gone far. I would say that, in my case, determination, luck and timing were crucial. Regarding determination, I am reminded of the words of the football coaching legend Sir Alex Ferguson: ‘Forget ability, to achieve in life you need something extra inside you, a dynamo that says I am going somewhere’.³ From early on, I was determined that a canefarmer’s life would not be mine. That desire and determination has been vital for my success.

I was the fourth child in a family of eight. Middle children are not usually burdened with expectations, obligations and responsibilities. That has certainly been my experience. I was often left alone to dream, to read whatever books and papers were around, which was not much. I recognised as a child that I was more interested in the conversations of adults—about politics, news, village matters—than I was in what children of my own age were interested in. Things I observed or heard about left a deep impression on me, sent me spinning into the inner recesses of my imaginary world. So, a certain seriousness of purpose was evident early. I was my *girmitiya* grandfather’s favourite grandchild and I remember to this day the stories he used to tell about his youthful days in India, stories of people and places, gods and goblins, food and festivals, games children played, the fabulous animals that roamed the land (elephants, bears, lions). They were full of magic and romance and adventure, probably

2 *Ratatouille* (2007), a computer-animated comedy film, produced by Pixar, released by Walt Disney Pictures.

3 John Brewin, ‘Adversaries Mourinho and Klopp might be well served borrowing from each other’, 27 October 2017, available from: www.espn.in/football/english-premier-league/23/blog/post/3245758/adversaries-jose-mourinho-and-jurgen-klopp-might-be-well-served-borrowing-from-each-other (accessed 27 May 2019).

vastly exaggerated. For grandfather, everything about India had a golden glow reflecting, I suppose, the nostalgia and longing of a ruptured life in a land far away from home. Grandfather connected me to a past that has remained with me.

My parents told us stories they had heard from their parents and elders, morality tales from the *Panchatantra*, the Indian book of fables, in the unlit silence of our thatched house where we all slept. Radio was new in the village and there was no electricity in the house, so these stories kept our imaginative life active, kept us connected to the frayed fundamentals of our ancestral culture. I sometimes recite the stories of my early childhood to my grandchildren, to their bemusement ('But Nana. Bears can't talk and elephants can't dance!'). One image from my childhood remains vivid in my mind. I still remember aeroplanes disappearing over the horizon, and wondered who the travellers might be, where they might be going, whether I too might one day go to faraway places that I imagined to be full of novel and exciting things we so lacked at home. My curiosity about the world around me developed early, and it has remained with me. I regularly attended Ramayana recitals in the village and often accompanied adults in reciting the text. It was a wonderfully enriching experience full of entertainment and enlightenment I now realise. The Hindi I picked up then is still with me, minus some of the earlier fluency.

DM: What was the extent of parental influence on your education? This is something you have said much about in your autobiographical writings.

BL: My parents certainly encouraged us to study hard so that we had the opportunities denied to them, and we did. Both my parents were illiterate, though my mother somehow picked up enough Hindi to be able to write her name. Father always affixed his thumbprint on documents. I had tough examples to follow. Both my older brothers were star performers at primary school, coming top of their class and it was expected as a matter of course that I would do the same. My quest for excellence, to be the very best I could be, began around this time. I always came first in my class. We were a poor family making a living from our leased 10-acre (4-hectare) farm growing cane, rice, vegetables, chickens and we had a cow. It was clear to us from the very beginning that there was no future on the farm for all six boys. We would have to make our future somewhere else. That was incentive enough to do well at school.

We did not know it then, but that small leased farm was our salvation; a bigger farm and who knows where we might be today. All my brothers except one left the farm and the village for good. We were the first generation of Indo-Fijians to make a living away from the farm in a profession other than that of our parents. So, I am immensely grateful for dodging ‘the nightmares of our parents’ generation’, to use the words of another historian, James Walvin, who grew up in straitened circumstances in the Greater Manchester area during the 1940s and ’50s.⁴

Village elders were also keenly aware of the importance of education. They raised funds from voluntary subscription and built a thatched-hut school in 1945, the Tabia Sanatan Dharam School. Shortly afterwards, primary education was put on a firmer footing, and it was expected that all school-age children would attend school even if for a few years. The Tabia School was started by orthodox Hindus—the whole settlement was predominantly Hindu—but there was no requirement that the headmaster should be one of their own faith. On the contrary, some of the early head teachers were Christian and Muslim (Austin Sitaram, Simon Nagaiya, Ashik Hussein). In my time, the headmaster was a South Indian (Subramani Goundan). There was something inherently noble about that attitude; the education of children was their top priority. I suspect some of that secular attitude rubbed off on us as we studied and played with kids of other faiths. In this respect, unfortunately, attitudes have hardened, and interfaith relations are not what they were or should be. Religious exclusivism is on the rise.

DM: Could you elaborate on what sort of teaching and teachers you got at the schools you went to?

BL: We were lucky in the teachers we had. Our teacher in the final year at Tabia, Mr Goundan, took his role very seriously. He held weekend classes for us, and before the Entrance Exam he asked all the boys to camp in school so that we could have extra night classes. One day he said that he would not be surprised if one of us might top the exam in Vanua Levu. That would be a matter of immense pride to him and to the whole village, just as the little certificates we got for writing little syrupy pieces about the great contribution the CSR was making to the economic development of

4 See James Walvin, *Different Times: Growing Up in Post-War England* (York: Algie Books, 2014), p. 202.

Fiji. We did not break any records, though I came reasonably close. Once we had passed the exam, it was assumed that we would proceed to high school, which most of us did.

Labasa Secondary School, now Labasa College, started in 1954. It was the island's premier school, and among the very best in the country, measuring its success with such schools as Natabua, Marist and Suva Grammar. It was a fully government-funded school and it attracted the best students and, more importantly, some of the best teachers as well. I had three teachers who had a profound influence on me: Vijay Mishra and Subramani (English) and Krishna Datt (History). They were all freshly graduated from New Zealand universities and all of them were teaching in Fiji for the first time. They took their role as teachers seriously and pushed us hard. All of them came from similar backgrounds to us and they understood our predicaments. They had gone places and so, they thought, could we. They introduced us to the broad sweep of world history, to the great works of English literature, to the pleasures of the imagination and the nobility of scholarly pursuit. No wonder they went far themselves. Vijay and Subramani became professors of English literature and Krishna, now, Santa Claus-like, a public figure in Fiji. My debt of gratitude to my teachers is immense.

DM: And then you went to university.

BL: Yes, this was the turning point in the lives of most of us. Started in 1968 as a regional institution, the University of the South Pacific, with its principal campus at Laucala Bay, produced generations of young people from the Pacific Islands who went on to become leaders of their respective nations. It opened new horizons for us, broke barriers of isolation, acquainted us with developments taking place all around us as our countries took the first tentative steps into nationhood. The people we met and the things we talked about planted the idea in us that we could play a part in the future of our countries; a naïve hope in retrospect, shattered before it saw the light of day. The university introduced me to students from other Pacific Islands about whom we had heard but never actually met, and this contributed to an awareness of being part of a wider region. And this, too, has remained with me.

The new university was also keen to prove itself as a centre of excellence in learning, eager to prove this to the outside world. At least it was at that time. I had some fantastic teachers who inspired us by their concern and commitment: June Cook, an Englishwoman fresh from a stint at

the United Nations; Ron Crocombe, the Professor of Pacific Studies; Walter Johnson (visiting from Hawaii, and formerly of Chicago). I still remember being told of the joy and pride my teachers at the university felt when they learnt that I had won a prize at the University of British Columbia for being the most outstanding graduate student. They felt vindicated, especially as I was the very first USP student to do graduate work at a university overseas. These teachers were an integral part of my luck. So, a measure of talent, great timing and a very large dose of luck. To these things, I would attribute my success.

DM: After a lifetime of studying Fijian history and politics, what are your thoughts on where Fiji went wrong?

BL: Fiji's great tragedy of the twentieth century was the yawning gap between the rhetoric its leaders espoused about what the country was and what it aspired to be with the observable reality on the ground. Our leaders mindlessly parroted metaphors of our supposed success. Fiji: a three-legged stool, denoting harmony and balance when there was none; Fiji the way the world should be,⁵ when it was the last thing that the world should have aspired to be. We averted our eyes from the deep chasms in our history; we wanted the world to believe that we were one united nation when we went on creating institutions that entrenched racial divisions in the country. Race was a fact of life, our leaders said, ignoring the fact that there were many other facts of life that were daily impacting on us. We were divergent in our attitudes and aspirations. One group wanted a nonracial common roll, the other a communal one. One group agitated against the continuation of colonial rule, while the other wanted its retention. We had a Westminster system of government, but with an unwritten rule: that indigenous Fijians must always control government.⁶ When that assumption was overturned in 1987, the military was unleashed to restore the status quo. The illusion we had celebrated for so long was finally shattered. For much of our history, we had no overarching narrative of inclusion and common citizenship; we were not a single united political community but a collection of ethnicities sharing a common geographical space. No wonder things fell apart in the end.

5 These words attributed to Pope John Paul II were not the words he spoke. He actually said, 'Fiji could be a beacon of hope to the modern world.'

6 The 2013 Constitution defines all Fiji citizens as Fijians, while *iTaukei* is used to refer to indigenous Fijians. But for the period I am talking about, Fijian meant indigenous Fijian. In this paper I use the old terminology because of the time frame involved.

DM: Could you say more about Fiji's political leadership at the time?

BL: Let me take indigenous Fijian leaders alone for the moment. Fijian people had some great leaders. Perhaps the greatest of them in twentieth-century Fiji was Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna.⁷ He was a man of exceptional personal attributes and achievements who would have stood tall in any society. But his vision for his people was, in my judgement, fundamentally flawed, backward-looking and, in truth, retrogressive. In the aftermath of World War II, he promulgated policies and recommended structures designed to revert Fijian society to its nineteenth-century moorings, in villages living under the guidance of traditional leadership.⁸ His primary loyalty was the perpetuation of aristocratic Fijian leadership for the colony.

This, at a time when Fiji was opening up to new challenges and opportunities after the war. What, pray, was the need to send the cream of Fijian male population to fight Chinese communist insurgents in the jungles of Malaya? We became cannon fodder for British imperial ambitions and adventures in Southeast Asia. There was an unwritten expectation that the United Kingdom would look after the interests of the Fijian people, guard them against ambitions of the Indo-Fijian population, and our involvement in the Malaya campaign was quid pro quo. But by the mid-1950s, the UK was beginning to shed its colonies. It would put Fiji firmly on the path of decolonisation in the 1960s.⁹ Meanwhile, the Fijian people lost valuable time and opportunities to develop educational facilities, trade, commerce and commercial agriculture. The effects would last a long time. It was not as if there were no deeply felt pleas for reform and restructure of aspects of the Fijian administration—by O.H.K. Spate in 1959,¹⁰ for example, or the Burns Commission in 1960,¹¹ but these

7 See Deryck Scarr, *Ratu Sukuna: Soldier, Statesman, Man of Two Worlds* (London: Macmillan Education, 1980).

8 See Brij V. Lal, *Historical Dictionary of Fiji* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 92–93.

9 Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Fiji: British Documents on the End of the Empire* (London: The Stationery Office, 2006); and more generally W. David McIntyre, *Winding up the British Empire in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

10 O.H.K. Spate, *Fijian People: Economic Problems and Prospects* (Suva: Legislative Council Paper 13/1959); R.G. Ward and O.H.K. Spate, 'Thirty years ago: A view of the Fijian political scene: Confidential report to the British Colonial Office, September 1959', *The Journal of Pacific History* 25(1) (1990): 103–24, doi.org/10.1080/00223349008572628; Spate, *On the Margins of History: From the Punjab to Fiji* (Canberra, National Centre for Development Studies, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1991), pp. 99–117.

11 Sir Alan Burns, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Natural Resources and Population Trends of the Colony of Fiji* (Suva: Legislative Council Paper 1/1960).

went unheeded. Preservation of the chiefly-led social order and battering down the hatches against proposed constitutional reform during the 1960s became the primary concern of the new generation of Fijian leaders.

Indo-Fijian leaders, very briefly, subscribed to the values of modernity, democracy, equality and egalitarianism. They wanted a nonracial political culture, but these things found no traction in the broader body politic. The fundamental truth of their vision is belatedly being realised in the aftermath of the coups in Fiji. If Fijian and European leaders (and senior colonial officials) had adopted a different, more inclusive approach, things might have turned out to be different. Preoccupation with race blinded people to other issues of broader national good.

DM: And then what happened?

BL: Well, the Fijian social order and the assumptions that underpinned it had been under siege for some time, and it came crashing down with Bainimarama's 2006 coup. The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), the umbrella organisation of the indigenous community since the late nineteenth century, was unceremoniously abolished with absolutely no consultation with the Fijian people. Many traditional privileges were gone. The chiefly system itself was facing irrelevance in the daily lives of the people, and so on. Perhaps, in the early years of the twenty-first century, its time had passed as forces of modernity and egalitarianism buffeted all aspects of Fijian life. It is astonishing how little indignant protest there has been among indigenous Fijians themselves about the treatment meted out to their traditional institutions and values. That says a great deal about the state of affairs in the indigenous community.

The developments that have followed since 2006 have been promoted as unleashing a 'new revolution' to take Fiji away from the practices and politics of the twentieth century. There can be no doubt that it has marked a decisive break from the policies and politics of the twentieth century, which, if successful, has the potential to take Fiji into a new era. A race-based electoral system is a thing of the past. Every citizen of Fiji can now call himself or herself a 'Fijian'. Affirmative action policies and prior treatment afforded to certain groups are now history. Equal citizenship is in the offing. Most progressive-minded people will welcome these new developments.

DM: So a new era is at hand?

BL: That is another matter. Nearly all these changes have been forced through without consultation with the people or through their elected representatives in parliament.¹² The government uses the brute force of its numbers to bulldoze change through. The parliament is now a pliant institution, not a venue for vigorous national debate. Loyal former military personnel occupy important civilian positions. As I have mentioned, indigenous institutions have been hobbled or unceremoniously dumped. The language of much of the population, Fijian, is banned from being used in parliament (and so far there has been no howl of protest for reasons that are mystifying). The military is ostensibly in the barracks, but it enjoys a guardian role in the constitution, with the power to intervene to protect public interest, without the authorisation of parliament. It is, in fact, the interpreter rather than the enforcer of the duly constituted public will. The government base is fragile, extremely narrow. In truth, the government is run by one or two ministers, especially the attorney-general, who controls all the major ministries of government. Many of Bainimarama's former close supporters have been side-lined or sacked (Commander Lesi Natuva, Colonel Pio Tikooduadua, Commodore Esala Teleni, Brigadier General Mosese Tikoitoga, among others).

Getting back to your earlier question, the lessons of the past, indeed of common sense, have not been learned. In public life, means are just as important as the ends. Consent of the public, not coercion and intimidation, is the best way to lay the enduring foundations of change. Dialogue is a word missing from the government's lexicon. An illusion of democracy is no substitute for the substance of democracy. On all these grounds, the Bainimarama experiment leaves much to be desired. One hopes that Bainimarama does not go the way of one of his predecessors, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, taking to his grave the political infrastructure he put in place during his time as the nation's leader.¹³

12 See Yash Pal Ghai, 'Ethnicity, politics and constitutions in Fiji', in *Bearing Witness: Essays in Honour of Brij V. Lal*, ed. Doug Munro and Jack Corbett (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), pp. 177–206, doi.org/10.22459/BW.07.2017.

13 See Brij V. Lal, 'Making and unmaking of a Fijian colossus, A review essay of Tuimacilai: A Life of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara', *Fijian Studies* 13(1) (2015): 31–41, available from: [fijianstudies.net/wp-content/uploads/FS/13\(1\)/FS-13-1-Lal-Mara.pdf](http://fijianstudies.net/wp-content/uploads/FS/13(1)/FS-13-1-Lal-Mara.pdf) (accessed 24 January 2017).

DM: Can you share your thoughts on the quality and legitimacy of the current government in Fiji?

BL: The prime minister and his ministers read carefully crafted set pieces by international public relations companies such as Qorvis, which specialise in refurbishing the images of dictators and tyrants in the developing world. The effect is impressive, but without their scripts in front of them, many sound vapid and obtuse. The official narrative has a complete, unfettered run in the media. Propaganda is paraded as fact and in time assumes an air of unassailable authority. So, Bainimarama says that his 2006 coup was a nation-saving intervention. The truth is the 2006 coup was not about saving the nation, it was about saving Bainimarama's bacon; an act designed to subvert police investigation into his role in suppressing the mutiny of November 2000 and other related matters. No one dare say what everyone privately knows: that Frank Bainimarama is in thrall of his attorney-general, perhaps excessively, unhealthily so, to his detriment. This dependency relationship does his credibility and public image no good, but he is probably not aware of it or does not care. Constantly out on the campaign trail when not on the conference circuit, he seems to need public adulation for self-affirmation. His supporters attribute many fine qualities to him, but no one thinks of him as an astute and incisive intellect. They will also agree that he is a man of very short fuse, rough language and a volatile temperament.

The actual work of running the government is done by his attorney-general. To use an historical analogy, he is Fiji's Cardinal Richelieu, the power behind the French throne. An old Indo-Fijian canefarmer from Rakiraki visiting Australia invoked an analogy from the days of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR). 'Janab Saiyid-Khaiyum,' he said, 'is like the senior "Kulambar", the estate overseer. Whatever the Kulambar saheb wants to get done is done. His word was final.' All this may be an unfair characterisation of the actual situation, but I suspect many in the cane belt would understand that sentiment.

Attorney-General Khaiyum controls all the agenda-setting portfolios of government: he is Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Minister of the Economy (including finance and national planning), Minister of Public Enterprise, Minister of Civil Aviation, Minister of Communication, Minister of Public Service, Acting Minister of Education and Minister of Elections (while holding the office of Secretary-General of the ruling party). What does this kind of unprecedented and unhealthy concentration of power in the hands of one man say about the way the

government is conducted and decisions made? And, so it goes. All this is public knowledge, but the coercive media environment in Fiji suppresses discussion of critical issues. As I have said before, democracy dies without the oxygen of free speech.

DM: Professor Yash Ghai has written that, for an historian, you have taken a keen interest in constitution and constitution-making. Could you remind us how this came about?

BL: There is a long and proud tradition at The Australian National University of professors taking an active role in political and constitutional matters, beginning with Jim Davidson, the foundation professor of Pacific history at the ANU.¹⁴ There were others. Oskar Spate, the distinguished geographer, wrote that brilliant report on the social and economic problems and prospects of the Fijian people and later served on the Currie Commission whose report led to the establishment of the University of Papua New Guinea and on the Fiji Education Commission, which laid the foundations of Fiji's postcolonial education policy.¹⁵ Closer to home, there was Ahmed Ali, an ANU graduate, who served as a minister and diplomat in Fiji. David Stone and Alan Ward were other precedents.

This tradition of practical involvement possibly had a bearing, but I suppose I had always had a passive interest in politics and public affairs. I used to follow the legislative council debates in the papers in the late 1960s and 1970s, attended political rallies in the 1970s, and was active in student politics at the university, being for a while the editor of the student newspaper, *Unispac*. The Fiji Broadcasting Commission asked me to chair their 1982 election panel discussions, which brought me into contact with the leading political figures of the day. It also gave me an insight into and interest in the way politics were practised on the ground—how the sausage was actually made, so to speak. Out of that experience came my edited book *Politics in Fiji: Studies in Contemporary History*.¹⁶ I was dragging the fire-cart closer to the fireplace, and that engagement has persisted, along with the many frustrations it has spawned.

14 Doug Munro, 'J.W. Davidson – The making of a participant historian', in *Pacific Lives, Pacific Places: Bursting Boundaries in Pacific History*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Peter Hempenstall (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 2001), pp. 97–116.

15 Sir George Currie, *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in Papua and New Guinea* (Canberra: The Commission, 1964).

16 Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Politics in Fiji: Studies in Contemporary History* (Laie: Brigham Young University and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

DM: But what catapulted you directly into the political arena?

BL: The Fijian Military Coup of 1987. The coup was a deeply wrenching experience for me, not least because I had witnessed the race riots in Albert Park in central Suva. A fledgling democracy, by no means perfect, to be sure, had been overthrown; the verdict of the ballot box hijacked. All that generations of leaders had fought for, all that effort to create a peaceful, stable, democratic society, had come to naught. Worse, many in Fiji were cheering at what had happened. I joined the forces of protest, and wrote a book about it, *Power and Prejudice: The Making of the Fiji Crisis*.¹⁷ I was determined to put on record a thesis different to the one celebrating the coup. The coup, I believed then as I believe now, was a pyrrhic victory for indigenous nationalism and hugely counterproductive in the long run for the indigenous people themselves. It is no satisfaction to say that I have been proven correct. The coup forced me to think more deeply about the forces that had shaped Fijian history of the twentieth century. I was looking for clues that might help me understand the roots of Fiji's contemporary social and political ailments. Out of that quest came my *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*.¹⁸ In this book, I showed my hand in favour of the values of democracy and modernity. I showed where Fiji had missed the opportunity to forge a different, more inclusive future for all of its people. Instead of building bridges of understanding and common citizenship, we were busily erecting walls of ethnic compartmentalisation, deepening distrust and fear among the citizenry.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, that book and my other publications were being read in Fiji by political leaders, including Mr Jai Ram Reddy, the Leader of the National Federation Party and the Leader of the Opposition. I was invited to address the 1993 annual convention of the party in Nadi at which I spoke on what kind of constitution was appropriate for Fiji. The independence constitution of 1970 had been thrown out by the military and replaced in 1990 by a constitution that gave indigenous Fijians complete control of government. The latter was a draconian document, completely inimical to the values of democracy and principles of justice and fairness. In my talk, I emphasised the need

17 Brij V. Lal, *Power and Prejudice: The Making of the Fiji Crisis* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute for International Affairs, 1988, reprinted 1990).

18 Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of Fiji in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).

to move away from the country's preoccupation with race and to embrace a common future for all. The speech was widely disseminated through the media.

DM: That speech played a part in having you appointed to the Constitution Review Commission in the mid-'90s.

BL: It certainly did. When an independent three-person commission was established, under the chairmanship of Sir Paul Reeves, the former Governor-General of New Zealand, to review the 1990 constitution, Mr Reddy chose me to represent the opposition and, in effect, the Indo-Fijian community.¹⁹ The appointment forced me to put my money where my mouth was, so to speak, and I worked very hard with my fellow commissioners to produce a document that would pave the way for a united Fiji. That is how my foray into constitution making came about. I am not a constitutional lawyer or a constitutional theorist, like Yash Ghai, but I have a good understanding of the values and principles that should underpin democratic constitutions in the modern world, what kind constitutional architecture is necessary for multiethnic societies as well as the training to put things in an historical perspective. My commitment to democracy and to freedom, justice and equality, my unalterable opposition to military coups that overthrow democratically elected governments, has landed me in trouble. In 2009, the Fijian military regime deported me from Fiji and banned me (and my wife) for life from entering the country.

DM: Why, then, do you continue to speak out?

BL: Because not to do so would for me be unconscionable. One cannot be neutral on a moral battlefield, and for me what is happening in Fiji raises both political as well as moral questions: the fate of democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech. It has been said that I have forfeited my moral authority to speak on Fiji because I live outside. That is a fatuous argument. The issue of my residence or my citizenship or my ethnicity was never raised when the Fijian Parliament appointed me to serve on a commission to review the 1990 Constitution and to make recommendations for a new one. What should matter in the end is what you say, what your ideas are, not your place of residence, or your ethnicity

19 Report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission (Sir Paul Reeves, Tomasi Rayalu Vakatora and Brij V. Lal), *The Fiji Islands: Towards a United Future*, Parliamentary Paper, 34 (1996). Vakatora has written his own story, including his experience on the Commission in *From the Mangrove Swamps* (Suva: self-published, 1998).

or class. Or, to use a sporting analogy, play the game, not the player. People who use this argument would be the first ones to leave if they only could, whereas I, while living outside, have devoted my entire professional life of over 30 years to researching and writing on Fiji. Travel and technology freely transgress national boundaries. National boundaries have become ever so porous. Students in Fiji listen to my lectures, read my books and discuss my ideas, which make mockery of the ban. This is such an obsolete and archaic way of dealing with dissent. There is no use pretending to be King Canute in this age of inexorable change.

I will speak out whenever and wherever I see injustice and oppression. That is just me. The media in Fiji is muzzled, and views of government's critics get a short shrift. Draconian decrees reduce the space for free speech which makes it even more necessary to speak out. Free speech is a vital part of a democratic society. My views are broadcast on Australian and New Zealand radio stations, and they all reach Fiji—much to the chagrin, no doubt, of the Fijian authorities.

DM: And there has been a deafening silence from academics.

BL: At all the three Fiji universities, all kinds of subtle, and not-so-subtle, pressures are put on academics to toe the line, to appease the government. The government uses its purse strings to extract acquiescence, as happened in the case of a prominent academic at one of the universities who was fired from his longstanding job. Public lectures not authorised by the hierarchy are prohibited, scuttled. Academics are told to be 'responsible' and 'balanced', but these are code words for compliance and acquiescence. All this is especially sad because the university was once a place of vigorous debate about critical national and regional issues, but this is no longer the case. The local scene is dismal. Perhaps out of frustration—though this might be too charitable—some local academics run private businesses on the side. Scholarship takes second place in their priorities. The government has its supporters among some ageing academics, in Fiji and in Australia and New Zealand, who parrot the government line and sing its praises, seeking a moment in the sun in their twilight years. Some retired former Fiji people returned to lend a helping hand to the government only to realise that they were dispensable; some were discarded and became strong critics. All too late. In view of all this, in an area of darkness for free speech and free thought, it becomes even more important to speak up. It becomes important not only to point a finger but to show your hand.

DM: It is said by some of your critics that you are elitist, insensitive to the demands made on fellow academics living and working in Fiji.

BL: I would readily plead guilty to the charge of being elitist. It goes without saying that any university worth its name is a place of merit and talent, not a social welfare agency. Its purpose above all should be to extend the frontiers of knowledge. This foundational principle has been diluted in recent years by the need for relevance and accountability and the demands of consultancies. I understand the imperatives that drive this push, but in every decent university, there must always be a space for curiosity-driven research. In some places, there is increasing demand for equity and inclusion and gender/ethnic/class balance in appointments and promotions.

Some of this is needed and can be justified given the historical legacy of white male domination in the academia. Diversity is enriching, but I have also seen mediocre people get through because they fit one or the other category, to their own detriment and to that of the institution. Diversity and merit are not mutually exclusive. You can espouse the principle of diversity in the same breath as the principle of merit. In my own work, I have sought to meet the highest standards of contemporary scholarship in my own discipline, not always successfully, I would have to admit, but that impregnable fortress of excellence remains the ideal.

I have had the great privilege of teaching hundreds of undergraduate and dozens of graduate students in my career. Not everyone aspires to excellence, content to get by; not everyone is equally talented. People come to university for a variety of reasons, with a variety of expectations. That is fine, but I have pushed hard those who aspire to excellence. Some students found this hard going, but at the end they were immensely grateful that I had taken them seriously. It is a source of great satisfaction to me that work done under my supervision has been published in top-rated scholarly journals and by respected academic presses. Some of my former students have become close friends. They include students from the Pacific Islands. An academic career is a great privilege and it deserves to be treated as such.

DM: What is your advice to early career researchers?

BL: Aim high. Do not be content with inferior work. Read widely. Be bold. Dare to be different. Spend time reading the classic works in your field. Pay attention to style, to language and composition. I know that for

many of us English will be a second language, and so mastering its nuances will not be easy, but that is why we must work harder. Develop a voice of your own. Publish in the highest-ranked journals that the quality of your work will bear. All this is easier said than done, but there are few alternatives. Most experienced writers and scholars will tell you about the importance of revising your manuscript several times over if necessary. There is one other thing worth mentioning: the importance of having your prepublished work read by someone whom you respect and whose judgement you trust. The thought can be daunting, having to submit yourself to someone else's scrutiny. We all have egos that sometimes get in the way. But it benefited me greatly. I have a group of colleagues who, between them, have read virtually everything I have ever published. They put aside their own work to read and critique mine. And I have done the same with theirs. I also sometimes gave my prepublished work to my graduate students for their assessment, much to my benefit. Occasionally, the comments can be deflating but they give pause for thought, and that is a good thing.

DM: Have you grown and changed as an historian in your career? If so, how and in what ways?

BL: We all change with time and in response to changed circumstances, and I am no exception. I have moved away from quantification with which I began my career to a more literary exposition of history. I am more involved now. I write as an involved insider. I've always said that I write, not as some casual, disinterested bystander on the sidelines passing lofty judgement. I declare my hand at the outset so that the reader is fully aware of my stance. This is a different position to that with which I began. I came of age, so to speak, at a time when we were taught to be objective, to keep our personal opinions out of the narrative. Facts, we were told, spoke for themselves. I now know that facts don't speak for themselves; they speak only when spoken to, and they answer the questions we ask of them. Authorial intervention in the narrative is now commonplace when the partiality of evidence, in both senses of the word, is taken as given and when the fundamental unknowability of truth is freely acknowledged. But this was not the case a generation ago. I do not fully embrace the dogmas of cultural studies, but am sympathetic to aspects of it.

DM: But from the late '90s you have also been writing in a more creative vein.

BL: That is true. The discipline of history once drove my scholarly approach. It still does but I am now much more aware of the role of memory in capturing the texture of the human experience. The question that fascinates me now is how to write about pasts where written documents do not exist and where public memory is not properly archived. The question came to me when I began to think seriously about the social and cultural evolution of Indo-Fijian culture in the postwar years; how a people growing up in the shadows of indenture created a sense of community and gave it meaning and purpose, how they nurtured things that celebrated life and mourned its passing, how the frictions and petty conflicts were resolved—things like that. There is no archival record about these important questions. Memory is all we have to go by. So, I write about some actual incident that I myself have observed or been told about, but do so creatively, imaginatively at the interface of history and memory. As a trained historian, I can't invent facts—that is a cardinal sin in our profession—but I can breathe life into them through imaginative reconstruction. I addressed these questions by turning to my own experience of growing up in a village, Tabia, in rural Vanua Levu. I used the lens of that personal experience to reflect the larger patterns of change and evolution of my generation, but I gave flesh and blood to the bare bones of the factual truth: a conversation might be imagined, a scene described, a connection made, all to capture the nuances of the actual case in question. I have described this sort of writing as 'faction: using the tools of fiction to depict nonfictional truth'. A more widely known name for this sort of exercise is 'creative nonfiction'.

DM: Do you ever think about your legacy as a scholar, writer, activist? Do you care?

BL: It would be very unhuman not to care, but I don't spend much time on this subject. Certainly, the question was furthest from my mind when I was doing my work. I have always been deeply influenced by the philosophy of the Bhagvada Gita where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, as he hesitates to go into battle against his own cousins, not to worry about the fruits of action, but to do things according to your sacred duty, dharma. I should like to think that an independent approach unhindered by some rigid theory or theoretical dogma is evident in my work. I have always striven to create my own text rather than slavishly follow someone else's. I find this

approach immensely rewarding, both intellectually as well as emotionally. I have sometimes been accused of being an ‘empiricist’. I happily plead guilty. I thrill to the particularities of the human experience in its infinite variety and complexity. Abstract thought leaves me cold, unmoved. That is the way I am, and I wouldn’t want to change. I would be quite content to be seen as a student and follower of good English and American narrative historians whose works I still read for pleasure and instruction, though I can never even remotely hope to match their example: J.H. Plumb, G.M. Trevelyan, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Richard Hofstadter, C. Vann Woodward, and closer to home, Bill Gammage, Geoffrey Blainey and Ken Inglis, to name just a few. These masters of English prose teach us how to bring the lived human experience to the written page, how to make historical narrative sparkle.²⁰

DM: Do you have any regrets as you close one important chapter of your life?

BL: Oh, yes, there are many things I now regret, more things of omission rather than commission. The kind of career I was able to carve out for myself, beginning from where I did, that improbable background of village life in Tabia in the postwar years; that kind of career was possible only through single-minded pursuit of scholarship over many years. Many things I cherished—music, sports—had to be put aside, or put on hold. I am incredibly lucky in having the family I have, thanks immeasurably to Padma’s selfless devotion to the welfare of the family. She provided the ‘enabling environment’ that gave me the space to pursue my own work and inclinations unhindered: the long hours at work, the absentmindedness at home, the extensive and extraneous reading and writing on the side in spare time that had to be done to fill in the gaps in my education and training. A professional person in her own right, she is an integral part of the luck I talked about earlier. I now wish I had been a more active, involved partner on the home front. My children were tolerant of my various obsessions as they were growing up, but here too there is regret that I was not more involved with their lives. Regret, yes, but I am also enormously grateful for what I do have.

20 If I were to mention just two introductions to the art of fine historical writing, they would be A.J.P. Taylor, Robert Rhodes James, J.H. Plumb, Basil Diddle Hart and Anthony Starr, *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man* (London: Penguin, 1968), and Robin Winks and Marcus Cunliff (eds), *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians* (New York: Harper, 1969). I have these two books on my writing desk for inspiration.

There is some sadness and regret that the world I inherited, which formed and deformed my life, will go with me. This is a universal generational phenomenon, I realise, but the rupture in my case—our case, the case of our generation from Fiji living overseas—is greater, the loss irrecoverable. Fiji has been my passionate life-long obsession, but for my children it is their father's land, not theirs, a place to visit, perhaps, but nothing much beyond that. The world that formed me is alien, incomprehensible, to them: a prehistoric village with no paved roads, no running water, no electricity, hardly any reading material around. They cannot imagine me being born in a thatched hut at home, delivered by an illiterate midwife. The music that moves me and fills my house has no meaning to them. My mother tongue is not theirs. My quite extensive library of rare Fiji books and papers, lovingly collected over a lifetime, will have to perhaps find home in a library somewhere other than the homes of my children. As the poet says, 'The old order changeth, yielding place to the new / And God fulfils himself in many ways.'²¹

There is little point revisiting words left unsaid, things left undone. I did the best I could in the time I had. I will not leave this world wondering if I have made something of my time on earth. To use the words of Mary Oliver, from her poem 'When death comes', which I love repeating:

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.²²

I stood up for what I believed in, things I considered to be right and just and true. That will do me as my epitaph. *Terminat auctor opus.*

21 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Morte d'Arthur* (1842), available from: www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45370/mrte-darthur (accessed 25 May 2019).

22 Mary Oliver, 'When death comes', in her *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 10–11.

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