

Afterword

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When I was at the University of the South Pacific (USP), 1998–2004, themes for Pacific research by those of us in the Department of History/Politics suggested themselves from the events that were unfolding around us—the politics of Fiji above all: the coup of 2000, the prolonged detention of parliamentarians by rebels, the military mutiny, the 2001 election that brought to power Laisenia Qarase and the years of contestation between government and military leading to the coup of 2006 and a permanently influential military role in the government of Fiji. At the same time, we were highly conscious of the breakdown of law and order in Solomon Islands—something that directly affected the Solomon Islanders at USP—and the coming of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in 2003, a major regional intervention that was to last for the next 14 years. Wider global forces played their part in the decision to intervene in Solomon Islands, above all 9/11 and the Bali bombings, which prompted Australia to consider the security of the region in a new and threatening context.

The international economy and globalisation were a second major context that informed the interests of staff and students across many disciplines at USP. As the bandwagon of free trade advanced, special arrangements that favoured small countries were ruled inconsistent with the requirements of the World Trade Organization, spelling the end of Fiji's garment industry as a growing sector of the economy and large employer. The ideology of international competitiveness—that every country should do what it does best and then trade—might have applied to the fast-growing economies of East Asia, but it did not apply to the Pacific Islands, whose small size and remoteness consigned them to the rank of bit players on the stage of the global economy. This simple point—that some regions are

different from others—was missing from the understanding of the global bureaucrats who prescribed identical versions of neoliberal economic policy the world over.

A third context, emphasised officially by USP as the theme of all we did, was the Pacific Islands region itself, the home of most students and their likely destination after graduation. Whether it was Randy Thaman leading a group of USP students into the interior of Fiji; the geography staff decamping en masse to study Niue; history students heading for a visit to Bau or Levuka; the economists and development experts examining squatter settlements; the tourism academics testing the possibilities of eco-tourism; the marine studies students studying mangroves and coastal fisheries; or literature students delving for the first time into the work of Albert Wendt, Konai Thaman, Pio Manoa and Sia Figiel, the subject was close to students' interests and hearts because it was in the Pacific.

Regionalism was another context for those of us at what is, after all, a regional institution. Regionalism will be more than ever a focus of teaching and research at USP in the years ahead: an era of climate change, better management of fisheries and new regional agendas such as the Blue Pacific. Regionalism binds the Pacific together in common ambition for development. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, in their contribution to this volume, see the current changes taking place in Pacific Islands regionalism and diplomacy as 'of the order of the shift from the colonial to the postcolonial diplomatic system in 1971'.

The future will have its own contexts, and one of them will be the shift in the geostrategic situation in the Pacific Islands. The rapid rise of China in the region as a commercial partner, investor and aid partner with Pacific countries has unsettled the calculations of Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan and the US, all of them long accustomed to unchallenged Western dominance. Australia in particular has shifted course, announcing a step up in its Pacific engagement and a raft of policy initiatives, including a high-speed communications cable between Australia and Solomon Islands so as to ensure that the business did not go to the Chinese company Huawei, as well as a new infrastructure fund for the entire region. The visit by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Vanuatu and Fiji in 2019 symbolised the new Australian mood, and the importance of the University of the South Pacific in the future of the region was recognised by Morrison's announcement that Australia would fund a new Australia-USP partnership worth AU\$84 million

to 2025. China's rising presence in the region, then, has given Pacific Island states new leverage in their dealings with old development partners such as Australia.

What Australia does not have to offer the Pacific, at least at present, is action on climate change. For atoll states such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, climate change is an issue not merely of importance but of survival, and the urgency of their situation is reflected in the role they now play in global climate change diplomacy. Referring to the coal mining industry in Australia, the Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama reminded the Australian Prime Minister that, 'From where we are sitting, we cannot imagine how the interests of any single industry can be placed above the welfare of Pacific peoples—vulnerable people in the world over' (Dziedzic and Handley 2019). Climate change—causes, dimensions, solutions, diplomacy—is already a key theme in USP teaching and research in many disciplines and will continue to be so.

Another future theme can be seen in the work of a remarkable group of younger USP scholars who are examining the role of social media and the internet in Fiji and the rest of the Pacific. In a groundbreaking article published in 2014, Glen Finau, Romitesh Kant, Jope Tarai and Acklesh Prasad from USP and Sarah Logan and John Cox from ANU analysed 'Social Media and e-Democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu' (Finau et al. 2014). The researchers compared political social media Facebook pages in the three countries, concluding that social media is making government more accountable. Much more such research has followed and a recent joint article by USP and ex-USP scholars Jope Tarai, Glen Finau, Romitesh Kant and Jason Titifanue, together with Tait Brimacombe from the University of Adelaide, extends its horizons by focusing on digital feminism in Fiji (Brimacombe et al. 2018).

The University of the South Pacific stands at the threshold of a new era of leadership under Vice Chancellor and President Professor Pal Ahluwalia, who believes USP has 'a real opportunity to become a truly world-class institution by building upon the promise of its mission and values' (USP 2018). For its part, The Australian National University, which has enjoyed such a close relationship with USP for half a century, remains as much a centre of expertise about the Pacific Islands as ever and looks forward to another 50 years of cooperation with the premier institution of learning in the Pacific Islands region.

References

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This text is taken from *Understanding Oceania: Celebrating the University of the South Pacific and its collaboration with The Australian National University*, edited by Stewart Firth and Vijay Naidu, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.