4
Colonial regionalism

From the mid twentieth century, changing European ideas about the 'Pacific islander', as well as changing ideas Europeans had about themselves, led to a dramatic shift in the moral purpose of 'framing the islands', or at least in some influential quarters. Influenced by ideas of the right to self-determination and 'native welfare', but also by nationalism and geopolitical considerations, the Labor/Labour governments in Australia and New Zealand promoted, between 1943 and 1947, the establishment of a formal intercolonial regional organisation. This marking out of what was then termed the South Pacific (including the islands of the North Pacific from 1951) from a newly formed South-East Asia was accompanied by an effort to create an identity among the diverse peoples of the 20 Pacific colonies from Netherlands New Guinea to French Oceania. Referred to as an experiment by those attempting to create such a regional identity at the time, this colonial construction of a formal region influenced the shape of subsequent indigenous regional thinking and set up the boundaries within which postcolonial questions of Pacific identity, agency and community were later played out.

Formation of the South Pacific Commission

Meeting as the South Seas Conference in a Canberra grammar school in 1947, representatives of six colonial powers—the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, France, Australia and New Zealand—created a formal region with etched-in boundaries to replace the hazier notions of the

'South Seas' or 'the islands'.[1] After some debate over its naming, they decided to call this region 'the South Pacific', and established a regional institution, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), to 'encourage and strengthen international co-operation in promoting the economic and social welfare and advancement of the peoples of the non-self-governing territories in the South Pacific'.[2]

Australia and New Zealand initiated the 1947 conference at which the Canberra Agreement was signed.[3] They had been proposing the establishment of such an organisation since January 1944, when a decision to promote the creation of a South Seas regional commission had formed part of the agreement between Australia and New Zealand (the Anzac Pact).[4] They were delayed in taking their proposal further, first by the war and then by the creation of the United Nations. It is evident that the SPC would not have been formed without the initiative of the Australasian governments. The other colonial powers initially played a passive role and were less than enthusiastic about the proposal.[5]

The membership of the SPC was limited to the six governments which signed the Canberra Agreement. They are referred to in the agreement as 'participating governments'. The financial arrangements reflected the predominant role of Australia. The agreement provided for the following shares of the commission's annual budget to be contributed by participating governments: Australia, 30 per cent; the Netherlands, 15 per cent; New Zealand, 15 per cent; the United Kingdom, 15 per cent; France, 12.5 per cent; and the United States, 12.5 per cent.[6] The only

---

1   Not to be confused with 'the South Sea' (singular), which, following Vasco Núñez de Balboa's sighting of what was later called the Pacific Ocean (and which he called Mar del Sur), was used until the beginning of the nineteenth century to refer to the Pacific Ocean as a whole. From the nineteenth century, when the broader ocean had begun to be generally referred to as the Pacific, 'the South Seas' (plural) suggested a more restricted geographical area covering the islands in the southern and central Pacific and the waters around them. See Spate, 'The Pacific as an Artefact', pp. 34–5.

2   *Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission*, Canberra, 6 February 1947, Preamble.

3   The South Seas Commission Conference, 28 January – 6 February 1947. For a full account of the conference, see New Zealand Department of External Affairs, *Report of the New Zealand Delegation on the Conference Held at Canberra, 28 January – 6 February, 1947, for the Purpose of Establishing an Advisory Commission for the South Pacific*, Publication No. 26, Wellington: Government Printer, 1947.

4   Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australian–New Zealand Agreement', *Current Notes on International Affairs*, [Canberra], 15(1)(January), 1944: 2–9, Clause 31.

5   See Harry E. Maude, 'The South Pacific Commission', *Australia's Neighbours*, Series 4, No. 5, Melbourne: Australian Institute of International Affairs, June 1963, p. l; and Australia, 'South Pacific Commission', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 48(189), 1957: 87–93, at p. 88.

6   *Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission*, Art. XIV, S. 49.

changes in membership in the period under study occurred in 1962, when the Netherlands withdrew, and in 1964, when the membership rules were amended to allow the admission of a newly independent Pacific state, Western Samoa.[7]

The area to be covered by the SPC was originally limited to territories 'south of the Equator and east from and including Netherlands New Guinea'.[8] The boundary line was adjusted twice over the next 15 years— first in 1951, when the American territories north of the equator were included,[9] and second in 1962, when West New Guinea was excluded after becoming part of Indonesia.[10] After these changes, there were 19 territories within the commission's scope.

The broad embrace of these new boundaries was not suggested by the scope of any existing regional arrangement. The most inclusive of such arrangements, the Central Medical School in Suva, drew students from as far as Papua in the west and Western Samoa in the east, but did not include the American, French or Dutch Pacific.[11] To those determining postwar arrangements, it was the experience of the Pacific War that suggested a regional vision stretching over a much larger canvas. The prosecution of the war had required a conceptual linking of all the islands in a 'Pacific theatre'. It also necessitated intercolonial collaboration among the Dutch, British, Australian, New Zealand, French and American governments. The war also encouraged, at least in Australia, a breaking down of the conceptual barrier between 'Asia' and 'the Pacific'. In his wartime speeches, Australian external affairs minister Dr Herbert Evatt linked the area stretching from Timor to Fiji and New Caledonia in an 'arc of islands' concept that would underlie the Australian push for the creation of a South Seas region.[12]

---

7   *Agreement Amending the Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission of 6 February 1947*, London, 6 October 1964, Art. VII(b).
8   *Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission*, Art. II, S. 2.
9   *Agreement Extending the Territorial Scope of the South Pacific Commission*, Nouméa, 7 November 1951.
10   By way of Articles II and XIX of the Canberra Agreement.
11   The leprosy colony at Makogai in Fiji also drew its patients from various British, Australian and New Zealand territories. A more limited region was suggested by the most prominent of existing administrative arrangements, the Western Pacific High Commission, which only covered the British territories, and by the Nasinu Teachers' Training College, which drew its students from Western Samoa, Tonga and Fiji by the time of the 1950 conference.
12   See H.V. Evatt, *Foreign Policy of Australia: Speeches by H.V. Evatt*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1945, pp. 116, 132; and Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australian–New Zealand Agreement', Clause 31.

By 1947, political developments in South-East Asia suggested a western boundary for the South Pacific that included Dutch New Guinea. The moves towards independence in Indonesia and the Philippines and the creation of a region called South-East Asia confirmed that the South Pacific boundary would include all the remaining island dependencies scattered across the Pacific Ocean.[13] Despite the name 'South Pacific', and the acceptance of the equator as a rough northern border for the time being, it was clearly intended that the American islands north of the equator be included once their administrative arrangements had been settled.[14]

The SPC's role was limited by the inclusion in the Canberra Agreement of a 'saving clause', which ensured there would be no interference by the commission in the relationships between metropolitan powers and their island territories.[15] In accordance with this principle, the role of the commission was restricted to a 'consultative and advisory' one. Its advice was to be given to the metropolitan governments and not to the territorial administrations.[16] The powers and functions of the commission were also limited specifically to economic and social development fields to ensure that political matters were not discussed.[17] This 'no politics' rule was later to have an important effect on indigenous participants in South Pacific conferences.

The organisational structure proposed in the agreement consisted of a 12-person commission (two members representing each participating government) and two 'auxiliary bodies'—a research council to recommend and undertake research and a triennial South Pacific Conference to give the local inhabitants of the region an opportunity to discuss, and make recommendations concerning, matters that came within the commission's jurisdiction. To serve all three bodies, a secretariat was to be established.[18] Control of the organisation's activities rested firmly with the 12 commissioners, who were representatives of the metropolitan governments. They were to be the final authority on all matters. The other bodies established by the agreement were merely advisory

---

13   See Donald K. Emmerson, '"Southeast Asia": What's in a Name?', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 15(1), 1984: 1–21, at pp. 7–9.

14   Indeed, the boundaries of the South Pacific were redrawn to include the American islands north of the equator in 1951. See *Agreement Extending the Territorial Scope of the South Pacific Commission*.

15   *Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission*, Art. XVII (Saving Clause).

16   ibid., Art. IV, S. 6.

17   ibid., Art. IV.

18   ibid., Arts III, V, VI, IX, XIII.

to the central executive body. This arrangement, which ensured the dominance of colonial power in the organisation, became an important source of frustration for Pacific islanders in later years. There had been, however, a special effort made to encourage indigenous involvement in the work of the commission through participation in the South Pacific Conference—a crucial decision for the development of a regional consciousness among island leaders.

Trusteeship and self-determination

When they proposed the establishment of such a regional commission in 1944, the Australian and New Zealand governments were at least partly motivated by concern about promoting a regional community based on trusteeship principles. This owed much to the fact that there were Labor/Labour parties in government in both countries, and to the personal attitudes of Australian external affairs minister Herbert Evatt and New Zealand prime minister Peter Fraser.[19] Missionaries and anthropologists were also promoting the concept publicly in Australia just prior to the government's decision to initiate the establishment of a regional commission based on these principles. In 1940, the Reverend M. Frater had called for the formation of a 'South Pacific confederation', which would have as its purpose the promotion of security and 'the conservation and development of the native races'.[20] The Reverend John Wear Burton, head of the Methodist Overseas Mission, put forward a similar proposal.[21] In 1943, Adolphus Peter 'A.P.' Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney—drawing specifically on the principles of the Atlantic Charter—advocated a 'Charter for the Native Peoples of the South Pacific'. It included a provision for a 'Pacific Regional Council' to administer the promotion of native interests.[22]

Ideas about 'native welfare' had been around in different forms since the beginning of colonial rule. But at the end of World War II, these ideas took on new force in world politics. The UN charter spelt out the trusteeship obligations for powers with mandated territories, which included a duty

---

19   Evatt's central role in these developments is described in Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1970, pp. 478–88. See also Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 7.
20   M. Frater, 'Why Not a South Pacific Confederation?', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 15 May 1940, p. 22.
21   J.W. Burton, *Brown and White in the South Pacific: A Study in Culture Conflict*, Sydney: Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1944, pp. 62–3.
22   A.P. Elkin, *Wanted: A Charter for the Native Peoples of the South-West Pacific*, Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1943, pp. 7–9.

to promote the welfare and political advancement of dependent peoples. But trusteeship ideas were also applied in a more general sense to all dependent territories whether or not they were mandated by the United Nations. In this more general usage, trusteeship was seen as marking 'a formal recognition of the moral obligation to administer dependent territories with justice and a sense of responsibility towards the inhabitants themselves and the world at large'.[23] 'Trusteeship', in the postwar era, took the older 'native welfare' ideas and added legal and moral obligations as well as more explicitly suggesting, in its advocacy of political development, a move towards self-government. It became a strengthened norm of the international community.

These ideas were particularly influential in Canberra and Wellington, where Labor/Labour governments committed to democratic socialist principles were intent on applying the most progressive interpretation of the approach at the United Nations in relation to their own colonies. In July 1945, the Australian Minister for External Territories, Eddie Ward, made a controversial statement to the Australian Parliament outlining the commitment of the Labor Government to promoting native welfare in Papua and New Guinea. Indenture was to be abolished, there was to be a new emphasis on education and health and settlers' rights were for the first time to be constrained by 'native welfare' considerations.[24] According to the historian J.D. Legge, the parliamentary opponents of the new approach saw in 'all talk of improving the material welfare of native peoples in New Guinea merely the sentimental influence of starry-eyed theorists and long-haired anthropologists'.[25] In 1949, the *Papua New Guinea Act* began political development in providing for limited participation by local inhabitants in the new legislative council. The New Zealand Government was much further down this track. It moved quickly to put in place very significant political reforms in Western Samoa. In 1948, it established a ministerial council, comprising the high commissioner and the three *fautua* ('royal sons'), and a legislative council with Samoan members.[26]

---

23   A.H. McDonald, ed., *Trusteeship in the Pacific*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, published under the auspices of the Australian Institute of International Affairs and the Institute of Pacific Relations, 1949, p. vii.

24   J.D. Legge, *Australian Colonial Policy: A Survey of Native Administration and European Development in Papua*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson under the auspices of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1956, pp. 192–5.

25   ibid., p. 194.

26   These developments are described in detail in J.W. Davidson, *Samoa mo Samoa: The Emergence of the Independent State of Western Samoa*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 163–87.

The Australian and New Zealand governments were also intent on promoting native welfare and self-determination principles across the wider region. As early as 1944 these two governments made their intentions known in the Anzac Pact, in which they proposed the application of Atlantic Charter principles to the subject peoples of the Pacific.[27] To promote these principles, including 'political development', they proposed a regional organisation comprising the colonial powers with Pacific territories. The proposed regional commission was to be given the function of recommending

> arrangements for the participation of natives in administration in increasing measure with a view to promoting the ultimate attainment of self-government in the form most suited to the circumstances of the native peoples concerned.[28]

And it was to be given the function of publishing 'periodical reviews of progress towards the development of self-governing institutions in the islands of the Pacific'.[29]

However, the attitudes held by the Australian and New Zealand leaders were not shared by the other colonial powers with territories in the Pacific. These other powers were not motivated to the same extent by a belief in the rights of subject peoples to move towards self-government. While these powers had engaged in what might be described as 'native welfare' policies in the prewar era—even extending to significant political development in some cases—they did not want to encourage self-government as an endpoint, nor did they want any regional institution calling them to task on progress in this area. Their purpose was not to dismantle empire.[30] By January 1947, when the six powers met to establish the SPC, the political development aspects of the Australian−New Zealand proposal had been dropped so that agreement might be reached.[31] In his authoritative history of the formation of the SPC, T.R. Smith argues that, by 1947, 'neither France nor Britain nor the United States was willing to give away any of her rights to decide the political future of her dependent territories'.[32]

---

27   Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australia−New Zealand Agreement', Clauses 28−31.
28   ibid., Clauses 31(a), 31(f).
29   ibid., Clauses 31(a), 31(f).
30   In the case of the Dutch Government, the aim was to retain West New Guinea against pressure from the new Indonesian Government, which was keen to complete the decolonisation of the Netherlands East Indies.
31   Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 7.
32   Smith, *South Pacific Commission*, p. 12.

The colonial rulers did, however, see advantage in promoting regional trusteeship to counter the anticolonial forces at the United Nations. That is, they saw the embrace of the internationalisation of trusteeship as necessary to preclude intrusion by the United Nations. It was ultimately about maintaining empire in the face of the new emphasis on anticolonial norms in the international community. The result was a watered-down form of regional trusteeship, which disallowed the discussion of political development. The US, Australian and New Zealand governments had to bow to this more conservative interpretation of trusteeship to establish an intercolonial organisation concerned with native welfare.

While their main objective was to create a sense of region among themselves, and to be seen to be doing so by an international audience, these colonial powers also decided to encourage the participation of Pacific islanders in this regional project. This was to be done through a regular South Pacific Conference of territorial representatives whose recommendations would be tendered as advice to the new commission.[33] For those concerned with a more progressive interpretation of trusteeship, this was the potential sting in the tail. The United States, New Zealand and Australia promoted the idea of islander participation at the South Seas Conference of 1947. They departed from the recently established Caribbean model in attempting to ensure that the delegates to the conference were as far as possible Pacific islanders, to encourage both indigenous representation and local participatory processes.

Although not heralded as such, this was where their hopes for a broader notion of trusteeship resided. While the SPC was constitutionally forbidden to talk about political development, William D. Forsyth reported that Evatt, the then Australian external affairs minister, for example, was 'not blind' to the 'political potential' inherent in the conference.[34] This proposal was reluctantly accepted by those keen to maintain empire but only on condition that political development issues be prohibited in conference discussions. For those holding this view, there was even an advantage in this experiment because it would strengthen the image of regional trusteeship without giving away anything substantive to the anticolonial position. That is, it could be a showcase for a well-intentioned colonialism, which included Pacific islander participation.

33   *Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Commission.*
34   Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 7.

Geopolitics and nationalism

While 'native welfare' and trusteeship considerations influenced the decision of the Australasian leaders to promote the establishment of a regional commission, it is evident they were at the same time pursuing other motives of greater significance to them. When Fraser and Evatt met in Canberra in January 1944 and agreed, inter alia, to the establishment of a South Seas regional commission, the war against Japan in the Pacific was still in progress; Japanese troops were still in New Britain, New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Although the function of the proposed regional commission was stated as being 'to secure a common policy on social, economic and political development directed towards the advancement and well-being of the native peoples themselves',[35] the more pressing motive underlying this proposal is reflected elsewhere in the Anzac Pact:

> Within the framework of a general system of world security, a regional zone of defence comprising the South West and South Pacific areas shall be established and that this zone should be based on Australia and New Zealand, stretching through the arc of islands North and North East of Australia, to Western Samoa and the Cook Islands.[36]

In his speeches and writings on foreign policy in 1943 and 1944, Evatt repeatedly stressed the importance of the islands to Australia's security and the desirability of establishing a regional zone of defence. For example, in an address at the Overseas Press Club in New York in April 1943, Evatt said: 'Australia will naturally regard as of crucial importance to its own security the arc of islands lying to the north and north-east of our continent'.[37] He developed this theme further in an article in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* in August of that year:

> Of crucial importance to Australia's own security will be such Islands as Timor, New Guinea, the Solomons, the New Hebrides, Fiji, and New Caledonia … I therefore visualize the formation of a great South-west Pacific zone of security against aggression, and in its establishment, Australia must act with such colonial powers as Holland, France and Portugal, as well as with the United States and Great Britain.[38]

---

35   Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australian–New Zealand Agreement', Clause 31.
36   ibid., Clause 13.
37   Evatt, *Foreign Policy of Australia*, p. 116.
38   ibid., p. 132.

This concern with regional defence does not appear at first to bear any relation to the formation of the SPC, a body concerned with the economic development of the territories and the welfare of Pacific islanders; but it is in fact directly related. It is evident from speeches and writings of the time that Australia saw the welfare of the islanders and the development of their countries as important aspects of the future security of Australia and New Zealand. For example, in a statement to the House of Representatives on 14 October 1943, Evatt said:

> As a result of the war Australia must show a particular interest in the welfare and system of control of those islands and territories which lie close to our shores … We have a definite interest in seeing that, after the war, these islands should maintain sufficient bases and be developed along lines that will make them not a liability but an asset in the defence of the South-west and South Pacific.[39]

And, earlier in the same year, he was reported as saying that no 'regional system of security, however, can be permanent unless it has an adequate basis in economic justice'.[40]

There are two ways, then, in which promotion of economic development in the South Pacific was seen as advantageous to Australia from a defence point of view: first, as a means of developing the infrastructure of island economies so that in the event of war they would prove more useful as bases than they had in World War II, and second, as a means of increasing the welfare of the islanders so they would remain friendly to the powers which made this possible. The Australian and New Zealand governments thought the most effective way to promote the economic, social and political development they wished to see in the islands would be through a regional organisation. In view of the fact that they had control of only a few of the island territories in the region, a cooperative approach initiated and shaped by them was the obvious course to achieve some control over future developments in the region. In the Anzac Pact, the two governments agreed that

> the future of the various territories of the Pacific and the welfare of their inhabitants cannot be successfully promoted without a greater measure of collaboration between the numerous authorities concerned in their control.[41]

---

39   ibid., p. 142.
40   ibid., p. 116.
41   Australian Department of External Affairs, 'Australian–New Zealand Agreement', Clause 29.

To facilitate this collaboration, they proposed the South Seas regional commission. There were, however, additional factors influencing the Australian and New Zealand initiative. Disturbed by the fact that the United States, the United Kingdom and China had taken decisions at the Cairo Conference (in November 1943) regarding the future of the wider Pacific region without consulting them, and conscious of the decrease in British influence in the Pacific island region as a result of World War II, the Australian and New Zealand governments were anxious to devise their own plan for the South Pacific.[42] On 30 March 1944, in a statement to the House of Representatives, Evatt said 'we must have a primary and principal responsibility in determining the future of the particular region in which we live',[43] and, further, that

> Australia and New Zealand have a duty to make a positive contribution to the future of the Pacific. They are the two British Pacific Dominions which must uphold Western civilisation in this part of the world.[44]

Australia and New Zealand had desired such a role since the nineteenth century. However, in view of their ties with Britain and their own low stature on the international stage, their actions had in the past been more of encouraging British involvement rather than taking an active role themselves.[45]

The Australasian initiative can be seen, then, as being motivated primarily by strategic and nationalistic factors. While trusteeship or 'native welfare' considerations were also a significant influence, the evidence suggests that such considerations can be regarded as of secondary importance.[46] They influenced the form and intended preoccupations of the proposed regional commission, and provided the public justification for its establishment, but they were not the determining factors. Australia and New Zealand took the initiative while World War II was still in progress and in the knowledge that larger powers were taking decisions about postwar international

---

42   For the important influence the Cairo Conference had on Evatt's decision to take a regional initiative, see Alan Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy 1938–1965*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 73; and Hasluck, *The Government and the People*, pp. 482, 487.

43   Evatt, *Foreign Policy of Australia*, p. 176. See also C. Hartley Grattan, 'Australia and New Zealand and Pacific-Asia', in F.P. King, ed., *Oceania and Beyond: Essays on the Pacific Since 1945*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976, pp. 79–116, at pp. 98–9.

44   Evatt, *Foreign Policy of Australia*, p. 172.

45   Australia and New Zealand had, however, entered the region very eagerly as administering powers during World War I. See Grattan, 'Australia and New Zealand and Pacific-Asia', p. 86.

46   For a view of the motives of the Australasian governments that emphasises trusteeship or 'native welfare' considerations, see Smith, *South Pacific Commission*, Chs 1, 3.

organisation. The Australasian governments held the view that they should have primary responsibility for determining postwar arrangements for the South Pacific region. They wanted those arrangements to be such that they would minimise the opportunity for outside interests to gain a foothold in the region and so be in a position to threaten their security. They saw a regional solution, in the form of a regional commission comprising friendly Western powers responsible for all the territories in the region, as the appropriate organisational arrangement. These attitudes can be seen as an extension of the Australasian Monroe doctrine of the nineteenth century, only this time Australia and New Zealand were in a position to assert foreign policies independently of Britain.

The other colonial powers—the United Kingdom, the United States, the Netherlands and France—were not motivated by the same strategic considerations. Their removed geographical position and other commitments made the security of the South Pacific a low priority. If the stated purpose and subsequent activities of the SPC tell the observer anything about their motives, it is likely that they were at least partly motivated by the desire to promote 'native welfare' in their territories and saw regional cooperation as an effective way of approaching this task. However, as in the Australian and New Zealand case, more important considerations can be shown to underlie their support. In view of the attitude of these powers to the political development of their territories, as revealed in their refusal to have that subject come under the purview of the proposed regional commission, it could be argued that they viewed the establishment of the SPC as a means of keeping UN activity to a minimum in this area. In other words, it is possible to see the involvement of the colonial powers other than Australia and New Zealand as an exercise in tokenism—an effort to comply with the mood of global opinion by setting up an organisation seemingly taking care of the problems of the South Pacific, and consequently forestalling international examination of constitutional development in their territories.

Contending ideas on political agency, 1948–65

The first two decades of the SPC's operation reflected the tension between the two conceptual framings concerning the political agency of Pacific islanders present at the establishment of the organisation. On the one hand, the organisation was governed by the colonial powers for the

colonial powers, and the 'no politics' rule was enforced. The commission promoted native welfare programs across areas such as health, education and agriculture, consistent with the framing of Pacific islanders as deserving of development but not capable or deserving of political agency. In this sense, it was a continuation of a regional framing that had been dominant since the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, there were several subtle developments in the operations of the commission that were more representative of the principle of trusteeship: the depiction of an idealised Pacific islander who had the capability and right to exercise political agency, and of an idealised Pacific island society that had the capacity and right to self-determination. The first trend to note is that concerning the direction of the commission's advice. The agreement had stipulated that this should flow directly to the metropolitan governments. By 1957, however, the secretariat and technical officers had established relations with the territorial administrations and 'advice' flowed to them rather than to the participating governments.[47] This change in direction was formalised by the decisions of the review conference held in 1957.[48] By the early 1960s, the practice changed again. The commission began to establish direct relationships with Pacific island leaders. Harry Maude, who had been a member of the commission's research council in its early years, comments that it was here that the commission 'had achieved its most conspicuous success'.[49]

Running parallel with this change in orientation, and related to it, was a change in the work program. Smith distinguishes three stages in this development: the first was one in which the commission concentrated on research and advice; in the second, it emphasised technical aid; and in the third, it became concerned with education and training.[50] The earliest projects consisted largely of exploratory surveys. This gave way to a more applied research stage by about 1953. The 1957 review conference decided that 'the work programme should emphasise projects of applied research, technical assistance, and the dissemination of technical and other information adapted to the practical needs of the local administrations'.[51] In response to this decision, the commission session of that year directed

---

47   Maude, 'The South Pacific Commission', p. 3.
48   Smith, *South Pacific Commission*, p. 101.
49   Maude, 'The South Pacific Commission', p. 3.
50   Smith, *South Pacific Commission*, p. 99.
51   South Pacific Commission, *Seventh Session: Proceedings*, Nouméa: South Pacific Commission, 1957, App. 1, pp. 23–6.

the organisation to concentrate on a priority list of 10 subjects: fisheries, health education, nutrition, mosquito-borne diseases, public health, pests and diseases, plant introduction, literature promotion, education and aided self-help.[52] As the program became more directly related to Pacific islanders in the early 1960s, an increasing emphasis was placed on technical assistance and training courses.

In this period, the SPC was also responsible for establishing other regional institutions in which Pacific islanders could forge links with each other. These included the commission's Community Education Centre and the South Pacific Games. The former, set up in Suva in 1962, was established to train Pacific islander teachers and social workers in domestic science and community work. The idea for the South Pacific Games was first mooted by Pacific islander delegates to the fourth South Pacific Conference in 1959. The commission called the first organising committee, assisted in the formation of the games council and helped Fiji to organise the first South Pacific Games in 1963.

The most important policy expression of the principle of Pacific islander agency was the South Pacific Conference. As we saw above, this was intended as such by the Australian and New Zealand drafters of the Canberra Agreement. The conference provided the first opportunity for Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian leaders to get together and exchange views. Beginning in 1950, the conference met every three years until 1965, and annually from 1967. It stands out as the key aspect of the SPC influencing the development of Pacific islander awareness of the region, and of other societies within it. Maude commented that the conference

> has served to create for the first time in Pacific history what may be described as a regional outlook: a sense of common interests and problems and indeed, of common destiny.[53]

The role of the conference in fostering a shared regional consciousness among Pacific island leaders, and ultimately as the arena for a 'rebellion' against the hegemony of colonial regionalism, is developed in the next two chapters.

---

52   ibid.
53   Maude, 'The South Pacific Commission', p. 3.

Conclusion

As a result of the Pacific War, the 'idea of the Pacific' became an intercolonial project expressed in the establishment of the SPC and the creation of formal regional boundaries. While France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States were important players in these developments, Australia and New Zealand were the strongest promoters of the new regional commission. This regional project was part of their own nation-building, not only in relation to establishing their security, but also as part of an ideology of a 'civilising mission' and imperial ambition. The 'Australasian Monroe doctrine', as Bismarck called it in the 1880s, thus continued to be a key aspect of this story of the formal 'framing of the islands' in the 1940s.

The contest over the political agency of Pacific islanders began in earnest in the 1940s when the impacts of the Pacific War, Pacific anthropology and changing ideas within the Christian churches created a new idea about the potentiality of 'native peoples'. Rather than the negative images of political agency contained in the images of 'dying races' and 'child races' of earlier decades, there was recognition of the possibility of the capacity for future political agency in the doctrines of trusteeship, 'native welfare' and 'self-determination'. These became the basis of the regional project pursued by Labor/Labour governments in Australia and New Zealand in the period 1943–44. Other powers, however, saw the regional idea as a way of containing the self-determination ideas associated with the UN system of regionalism.

This was the culmination of 100 years of normative contest within the European imagination over whether Pacific islanders had the capacity for political agency and whether they should be encouraged to act on it. It was also the beginning of a three-decade regional contest over political agency within the new regional structure, with France in particular on one side, and Australia, New Zealand and Pacific island leaders on the other.

The boundaries of the Pacific island region began as a hazy notion. 'Oceania', as first conceived in France in the 1830s, included much of what we would now call island South-East Asia. The South Seas generally referred to the island world of the Pacific including the islands north of the equator. But it was in 1947 that the official boundaries of the South Pacific were first drawn. They reflected a division between the new

South-East Asia and the Pacific island region with a boundary west of the island of New Guinea. At first, it included only islands south of the equator, but from 1950 the region expanded to include the American Pacific north of the equator. In 1962, the boundaries of the South Pacific were again redrawn, this time to exclude West New Guinea after it was taken over by Indonesia.[54]

---

54 West New Guinea remained part of the Pacific as defined by some NGOs and some Pacific island governments.