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The decolonisation of regional governance

The key tension inherent in the ‘South Pacific experiment’ of 1950, and in the establishment of the SPC three years earlier, was between two competing imperial framings of the Pacific—one motivated by the principle of self-determination and the other by continued imperial control but with a commitment to ‘native development’ and ‘native welfare’. The loss of government in 1949 by the main champions of political self-determination for Pacific peoples—the Labor/Labour parties of Australia and New Zealand—meant that self-determination was off the agenda in the 1950s. All colonial governments in the Pacific—the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand—now shared a commitment to continued colonial control within their territories and made only minimal attempts to honour the spirit of the trusteeship arrangements they had entered into or to meet new global norms of self-determination. The strategic imperatives of the Cold War and economic interests took precedence. Britain and the United States were using their Pacific territories as nuclear testing sites; Australia and New Zealand were feeding a postwar agricultural boom with phosphate from their trust territory, Nauru.

This mindset was reflected in the form of regional governance promoted under the auspices of the SPC. Decision-making within the SPC remained dominated by colonial powers and the development agenda promoted by the organisation reflected these interests. Reflecting on the SPC’s first decade (the 1950s), Fiji’s prime minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (1971–87), the leading player in regional politics from the 1960s

to the 1980s, observes that it 'went on benignly and benevolently but unimaginatively treating the South Pacific people as though they were children who were not capable of handling their own affairs'.¹

From the early 1960s, the contest between imperial control and self-determination resurfaced. This time it was not a contest between progressive and conservative colonial powers but rather a struggle between all of the colonial powers, on the one hand, and the emerging island leaders of Pacific territories undergoing political change, on the other. The new leaders of Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands and Nauru, in particular, demanded change to the power structure within the SPC. They also moved to establish their own indigenous regional organisations—most importantly, the South Pacific Forum (SPF). Their aim was to establish indigenous control of regional decision-making consistent with the self-determination principle that was being promoted by the United Nations as a global discourse and was starting to impact on Pacific territories. They wanted regional norms to reflect these changing global ideas.

This contest over political agency in regional decision-making from 1962 to 1974 culminated in a new agreement to govern the SPC, guaranteeing formal control by the Pacific island representatives, as well as in the establishment of a new major regional institution controlled by Pacific islanders, the SPF. It was primarily a contest over political agency, but this would, in turn, determine the outcomes of subsequent decisions about the political purpose of the regional community—most notably, about how these emerging Pacific countries would control global economic and political forces and react to continuing colonialism and nuclear testing in the region.

Although the new Pacific island leaders challenged the dominant principles on which regional governance had been based, it is notable that the colonially imposed boundaries of the region were by and large accepted but with important exceptions. The boundaries of the SPC became the outer boundaries of regional consciousness and identity, and the outer limits on action on such issues as nuclear involvement and continued colonial intrusion. However, participation at the regional table required self-determination as the foundation credential. This created a tension between those accepted as belonging to a Pacific regional identity and those

1 Mara, 'Regional Co-operation in the South Pacific', p. 2.

accepted as having the right to participate in regional diplomacy. This, in turn, laid the basis for a subsequent contest about self-determination and political agency, which will be examined in Chapter 7.

Decolonisation and regional self-determination

The backdrop to the emergence of a commitment to regional self-determination among key Pacific leaders in the 1960s was the movement in global discourses and commitments concerning decolonisation, and their expression in the gathering pace of decolonisation in Africa and South-East Asia, following the earlier movement in South Asia. The change in British policy towards decolonisation after prime minister Harold Macmillan's 'wind of change' speech to the South African Parliament in Cape Town in February 1960 was a key turning point in this discourse, as was the signing of the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in December of the same year. In this context, it was hard for colonial powers not to make some gesture towards political development within their Pacific territories. New Zealand moved early to change its approach in response to pressure from the United Nations and from the Samoans, who had never accepted colonial rule. The early decolonisation in Samoa (then known as Western Samoa) in 1962 was followed by self-government in Cook Islands in 1965 and Niue in 1968. A very determined campaign by Nauruans for justice after severe exploitation by Australia, New Zealand and Britain, supported by UN pressure, led a reluctant Australia and New Zealand to move Nauru towards independence in 1968.

Britain began to move Fiji to independence from 1965, despite the reluctance of indigenous Fijians; it also moved slowly to create political development in its other smaller Pacific territories (although at this stage full independence was not contemplated). Similarly, in Micronesia, the United States created forms of representation and limited self-government as part of obligations in administering a UN trusteeship. Even in the French territories where there was no recognition of a right or need for self-determination, there was a move to create advisory assemblies and forms of indigenous representation.

The upshot of this activity was a change in the consciousness of key indigenous leaders across the region. Its most dramatic expression was the emergence of four fully independent states (Western Samoa in 1962, Nauru in 1968 and Tonga and Fiji in 1970) and two associated states (Cook Islands in 1965 and Niue in 1968). This change in consciousness was also being experienced by some key figures in territories experiencing some early stages of decolonisation, such as Papua New Guinea.²

The particularly important development, for the purposes of this study, was how this idea of self-determination became a regional principle. It became a shared norm promoted by Pacific indigenous leaders as the basis of legitimate *regional* governance, as well as legitimate *national* statehood. The big regional story of the 1960s and early 1970s is how the indigenous regional movement championed self-determination as a legitimating principle in the face of continuing colonial reluctance to change the regional power structures. New Zealand was an early exception because of the change in its own policy. By decade's end, it was joined by Australia, after a change of government in 1972. France and the United States, on the other hand, remained staunch defenders of the colonial regional order throughout the 1960s.

The Pacific leaders' embrace of the regional legitimating principle of self-determination was expressed not just in the effort to gain control of decision-making structures in the regional forums and in establishing indigenous political agency. It was also focused on anticolonialism everywhere within the boundaries of the region, including opposition to nuclear testing at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in French Polynesia. There was a developing shared belief in *regional* self-determination as a principle underpinning legitimate regional governance of the regional political community.

This concern with political agency was also about establishing the means to deal with how Pacific islanders were forced to live their lives anywhere in the region. Nuclear testing, for example, was a prime concern from the mid 1960s. Frustration with having discussion of this banned in regional forums was a major part of the story of why island leaders wanted

2 The decolonisation of the Pacific is examined comprehensively in the first section of Howe et al., *Tides of History*.

regional structures that could give voice to their concerns. Thus, regional self-determination was seen as vitally related to the moral and political purposes of both regional governance and local societies.

The 'Lae rebellion'

Although there had been earlier isolated instances of islanders' dissatisfaction with their role within the SPC, it was not until the 1962 conference, held at Pago Pago, in American Samoa, that such feelings were widely shared and articulated.³ The mood influenced the representatives of the colonial powers meeting at the 1964 session of the SPC, which decided that the conference would henceforth be able to make recommendations concerning the work program. Delegates at the sixth conference (in 1965), held in Lae, in Papua New Guinea, were disappointed, however, in how their newly won power worked in practice. This disillusionment was the immediate cause of an outspoken attack on the SPC, expressed in both formal resolutions and supporting speeches.⁴

Islanders thought the resolution proposed by Ratu Mara, the Fijian representative, was an important prerequisite to gaining some control over SPC activities. It was felt that if the territories were able to contribute to SPC funds then they, as representatives of those territories, would have the right to control the commission's activities. These sentiments were reflected in the words of Mariano Kelesi, the British Solomon Islands delegate:

If we agree to contributions to the Commission's funds we will have more say in this Conference; if we refuse to contribute, we will not have the right to say anything.

Buren Ratieta of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands said: 'I think the feeling we should have about this Commission is that it is ours. We should therefore contribute to the Commission because it is ours.' Thomas Remengesau of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands commented that 'this resolution will be regarded as a second step towards the Islanders acquiring more

3 For an account of the mood at the Pago Pago conference and of earlier instances of dissatisfaction, see Herr, 'Regionalism in the South Seas', pp. 179–86.

4 Robert Langdon, 'South Seas Regional Council May Grow Out of Lae Talks', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1965: 21; and SPC, *Pacific Forum (Sixth South Pacific Conference, 1965)*, Nouméa: SPC, 1966, p. 36, Resolutions 75(e) and 75(f).

responsibility within the framework of the SPC' (the first step being the acquisition of the right to discuss draft work programs). And Ratu Mara argued that

to deny them [the territories] this responsibility is not in keeping with the trend that has been taking place in the territories. We are being trained to take more responsibility in our own countries, so why should we be denied responsibility here?⁵

Ratu Mara was the principal protagonist, but nearly all islander delegates supported him. He was later to describe their joint action as a 'rebellion'. He argued that the 'confrontation' with the colonial powers—although 'not an easy thing to do because Fiji was still under colonial rule'—was necessary because

the powers seemed incapable of realising that the winds of change had at last reached the South Pacific and that we peoples of the territories were no longer going to tolerate the domination of the Commission by the Metropolitan powers. We were sick of having little to say and no authority. Regardless of what we said or did the final decision was always in the hands of the Metropolitan powers.⁶

For both indigenous participants and European observers, the Lae conference represented a watershed in regional affairs. William Forsyth, who was Secretary-General of the SPC at this time, said:

[T]he year 1964–65 may come to be recognised historically as the point at which in the South Pacific, emphasis moved over from the relationship of dependency to that of local inter-change.⁷

He cites the Lae conference as one of the prime indicators of this development. Robert Langdon, who was the *Pacific Islands Monthly's* correspondent at the conference, commented at the time that 'the Lae Conference may well prove to be a milestone in Pacific history'.⁸

5 SPC, *Pacific Forum (Sixth South Pacific Conference, 1965)*, pp. 7, 23, 27.

6 Mara, 'Regional Co-operation in the South Pacific', p. 7.

7 Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 15.

8 Langdon, 'South Seas Regional Council May Grow Out of Lae Talks'. See also R.Q. Quentin-Baxter, 'A New Zealand View', in Mary Boyd, ed., *Pacific Horizons: A Regional Role for New Zealand*, Wellington: Price Milburn for the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1972, pp. 21–31, at p. 22.

These observations have proved correct. Prominent islanders later recognised the Lae conference as the beginning of indigenous political assertion within the SPC. Ratu Mara, in particular, has emphasised the significance of the actions taken in 1965:

I had solid backing from the representatives of all the territories in that revolt and though what I said then might not have been welcomed by the Colonial leaders of that time, our combined attack on the old system had the effect of bringing democracy into the Commission. The happenings of 1965 eventually led to a reversal of the earlier positions.⁹

Dr Macu Salato, when secretary-general of the SPC, took a similar view. He regards the Lae conference as being the occasion on which ‘the voice of Pacific regionalism first began to make itself heard in the Commission’.¹⁰

The ‘rebels’ had to wait until 1969 for an answer to their request regarding territorial contributions. The underlying demand of the sixth conference—that islanders should have a more significant role within the SPC—received a prompter response. This demand had been reiterated at the 1966 meeting of the SPC. Ratu Mara, attending as one of the United Kingdom’s commissioners, told the meeting that Fiji would have little use for the SPC in the future if it did not regard the territories as equal partners.¹¹ In response to these demands, at the next conference (in Nouméa in 1967), A.J. Fairclough, the senior commissioner for the United Kingdom, announced, on behalf of the participating governments, a series of arrangements aimed at giving the conference ‘a greater role in determining the work of the Commission than it has at present’.¹² Fairclough attributed these changes to Ratu Mara, ‘who had pressed hard for the territories to exert influence on the Commission’.¹³

The new arrangements provided for the draft annual budget of the SPC to be submitted to territorial administrations and participating governments prior to the meeting of the conference. The conference was to examine the draft work program and its budgetary implications and recommend

9 Mara, ‘Regional Co-operation in the South Pacific’, p. 8.

10 Salato, ‘South Pacific Regionalism’, p. 32.

11 Smith, *South Pacific Commission*, p. 203.

12 SPC, *Report of the Seventh South Pacific Conference and Proceedings of the Thirtieth Session of the South Pacific Commission*, Nouméa: SPC, 1967, Annex 1, p. 20.

13 ‘It’s Not an Exclusive Club Now—And the Islanders Like It’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1967: 25.

to the SPC, for its final decision, the particular items to be included.¹⁴ The conference was henceforth to be held annually (it was previously triennial) to enable delegates to carry out these new functions, and the conference was to be followed immediately by an SPC session. But the participating governments took care to emphasise that ‘the ultimate authority over the work of the Commission will remain as now with the Participating Governments in the Session’.¹⁵ Another innovation introduced at the seventh conference (in 1967) was that the chairman of the conference was henceforth to be a representative of the territories instead of a commissioner of one of the metropolitan governments, as provided for in the Canberra Agreement.

At the eighth conference (in 1968), the delegates repeated their request for territorial contributions to SPC funds. This was done by way of a resolution. Although there were no other relevant resolutions, there were strong and outspoken attacks made during speeches on the powers of the SPC. Ratu Mara, who was chairing the conference, suggested delegates should have a more direct say in the projects proposed for their benefit. Faletau of Tonga asked: ‘Why do the decisions of the Conference end as recommendations to the Commissioners? What right has the session to debate what the Conference puts forward?’¹⁶

Although the conference recommendations on the work program, the budget and other matters required the approval of the SPC, the eighth conference noted that ‘with regard to its recommendations on the Budget and Work Programme, the representatives of the participating Governments have expressed an undertaking to accept these recommendations as put forward’.¹⁷ This certainly was the case in 1968 when the thirty-first session of the SPC, meeting immediately after the eighth conference, approved all the recommendations of the conference. Thus, by 1968, the conference had assumed the SPC’s former major annual task: the determination of the budget and work program. Stuart Inder reported that the 1968 conference ‘spelled the end of the “exclusive club” charge that was first levelled at the Commissioners by Ratu Mara of Fiji in 1965’.¹⁸

14 SPC, *Report of the Seventh South Pacific Conference*, p. 20.

15 *ibid.*, p. 20.

16 Kathleen Hancock, ‘There was Blood and Thunder about More Power for the Islanders’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1968: 30.

17 SPC, *Report of the Eighth South Pacific Conference and Proceedings of the Thirty-First Session of the South Pacific Commission*, Nouméa: SPC, 1968, p. 20, s. 9.

18 Stuart Inder, ‘And Now the SPC’s Crisis is Over’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1968: 31.

At the 1969 conference, Ratu Mara put forward a proposal to establish a committee to review the activities of the SPC and the South Pacific Conference to see whether further change was desirable. His proposal was supported by the meeting and placed before the SPC, which also approved it.¹⁹ The committee met during 1970 under the chairmanship of Laufo Meti of Western Samoa. The 1969 session of the SPC, meeting shortly after the ninth conference, decided to appoint an islander, Afioa Misimosa, as the next secretary-general.²⁰ Prior to 1970 only Europeans selected from the metropolitan countries had filled this post. Now, for the first time, an islander was at the head of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the body which had significant influence on the content of the draft work program and which was responsible for carrying out the final program as approved by the SPC. It was in 1969, too, that Ratu Mara finally received a response to his demand for territorial contributions. Henceforth, all territorial administrations, except those under French control, were to make financial contributions to the general SPC budget.²¹

The review committee set up by the ninth conference reported to the next annual conference, held in Suva. Two of its recommendations were concerned with increasing the powers of the South Pacific Conference: the conference should elect its own chairman and deputy chairman, who may or may not be a commissioner, and should determine its own rules of procedure and agenda.²² The first recommendation was put into operation at the end of the conference when the delegates elected the chairman and deputy chairman for the next meeting.²³ The request for control over the agenda and rules of procedure was granted at the thirty-fourth session of the SPC in 1971.²⁴ At the 1970 conference, the delegates also made a bid for a voice in selection of the principal officers of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, suggesting appointment by a committee comprising representatives of the territories and of the participating governments.²⁵ But by this time, the Pacific leaders were also determined to go outside the SPC framework and establish their own form of regional governance.

19 Stuart Inder, 'Togetherness Comes to the SPC', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1969: 26.

20 *ibid.*, p. 27.

21 SPC, *South Pacific Report 1969-70*, Nouméa: SPC, 1970, p. I.

22 SPC, *Report of the Tenth South Pacific Conference and Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Session of the South Pacific Commission*, Nouméa: SPC, 1970, p. 32, Resolution 19.

23 *ibid.*, p. 24, s. 33.

24 SPC, *Report of the Eleventh South Pacific Conference and Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Session of the SPC*, Nouméa: SPC, 1971, p. 58, Resolution 30.

25 SPC, *Report of the Tenth South Pacific Conference*, pp. 14-16.

Speaking with ‘a true island accent’

In the same year as the Lae rebellion (1965), which marked the start of the move by islander leaders to decolonise the SPC, the same island leaders initiated their own modest regional consortium, the Pacific Islands Producers’ Association (PIPA).²⁶ Ratu Mara, then member for natural resources in the Fiji Government, was again the primary force. He saw the need for closer cooperation among island territories supplying bananas to the New Zealand market. Fiji was joined by Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands.²⁷ Thus, PIPA really amounted to a Polynesian venture, reflecting the more advanced stage of decolonisation of the eastern part of the Pacific and the fact that the main banana exporters also happened to be Polynesian territories. Although initially formed with the practical objective of improving access and the terms of trade for island bananas into the New Zealand market, it gradually expanded its scope to cover other agricultural products and all steps in the production, transport and marketing cycle.

PIPA was created not merely to work on practical problems of development and trade, although this was the stated objective. Most of the activities undertaken by PIPA could have been approached through the SPC, yet a decision was taken to establish a new organisation. Although PIPA achieved very little in terms of its development brief, it was celebrated in terms of its political symbolism. For example, in his closing speech to the 1971 PIPA conference, Tupua Tamasese said: ‘[T]his is the strength of our small body ... this is an association of islanders, created by islanders and successful only from the efforts of such.’²⁸ And Prince Tu`ipelehake, then prime minister of Tonga, later referred to PIPA as being, in its day, the only organisation ‘of its kind which spoke with a true island accent’.²⁹ For Albert Henry, then premier of Cook Islands, PIPA was important as

26 Between 1965 and 1968, this organisation was called the Pacific Islands Producers’ Secretariat. PIPA’s constitution did not become operative until 1971. See Pacific Islands Producers’ Association [hereinafter PIPA], *Constitution Establishing the Pacific Islands Producers’ Association*, Suva: PIPA, 1971.

27 The details of PIPA’s origins and early history are described by H.P. Elder, the executive secretary of the organisation, in PIPA, *Pacific Islands Producers’ Association*, Suva: PIPA, March 1971.

28 PIPA, *Sixth Session: Record of Proceedings*, Nuku`alofa: PIPA, April 1971, p. 24.

29 South Pacific Forum Secretariat [hereinafter SPF Secretariat], ‘Summary Record and Final Press Communiqué’, in SPF Secretariat, *Leaders’ Communiqué: Fifth South Pacific Forum, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 20–22 March 1974*, Suva: SPF Secretariat, 1974, p. 10.

a symbol of Polynesian assertion in particular: '[F]or 200 years, the white man has been exploiting the resources of the Pacific, but now Polynesians are working together for Polynesians.'³⁰

PIPA was terminated in 1973 but only because there was by then a more ambitious and wideranging indigenous organisation that could take over its activities. Prince Tu'ipelehake stated that he did not object to PIPA being subsumed by the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation (SPEC: the research arm and secretariat of the new South Pacific Forum) because he regarded them both as 'speaking the same language'.³¹

Indigenous regional governance

The South Pacific Forum (SPF) was set up in August 1971 to provide the heads of the newly independent Pacific states with a forum to discuss 'matters of general interest'.³² Its creation was spurred by the frustrations felt with the limits placed on the scope of discussion in the SPC. As we saw in Chapter 4, the Canberra Agreement limited the SPC's scope to economic and social development; political matters had been purposely excluded. This began to annoy islander delegates to South Pacific conferences during the 1960s. Several attempts were made to introduce political issues. At the 1962 conference, for example, Netherlands New Guinea delegates attempted to raise the subject of the Indonesian 'invasion' of their country. The chairman ruled against hearing the issue in view of its political nature. It was reported that this ruling 'caused mutterings of dissent'.³³ The attempt to introduce the subject of the French nuclear tests at the 1970 conference resulted in island delegates repeatedly raising the issue until the French commissioner, M. Nette, walked out of the conference.³⁴

30 'Pacific Leaders Make Nuku'alofa a Get-Together to Remember', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1971: 22.

31 SPF Secretariat, 'Summary Record and Final Press Communiqué', p. 7.

32 Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, 'The South Pacific Forum', Address at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, 25 August 1972, p. 5.

33 'Lae Meeting May Bring Some Get-Up-And-Go to the SPC', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, June 1965: 49.

34 J. Eccles, 'Not So Much Togetherness Now', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, October 1970: 18.

Ratu Mara has emphasised the link between the creation of the SPF and the frustration that island leaders felt about the 'no politics' rule. He said the fact that political matters could not be discussed 'irked the representatives of the territories, especially those which had attained independence or were taking steps towards independence'. As a result of such frustration, he said, 'conviction grew that there must be another organisation to fill the gaps left in the Commission's framework'.³⁵ Tupua Tamasese Lealofi IV, then prime minister of Western Samoa, made a similar observation. Speaking to the twelfth South Pacific Conference (in Apia in 1972), he commented:

I believe that no organisation can emerge to flourish without there being a legitimate need for it. Recent developments (the establishment of the Forum) might therefore be pointed to as fair criticism of this organisation of ours [the SPC], because these other bodies could only have grown up to meet needs in the region that were not being catered for, thus inferring a chronic inability on the part of the South Pacific Commission to grow with the times.³⁶

The idea of establishing a new regional organisation was first discussed by the leaders of the independent island states, and of those approaching independence, in 'out of conference meetings during the South Pacific Conferences of 1967, 1968 and 1969'. Ratu Mara claims that following these conferences he put out 'feelers' to the New Zealand prime minister to see how he would react to the idea of hosting a meeting of Pacific island leaders. Ratu Mara does not indicate what sort of reception he received. According to Mara, it was at a private meeting of island leaders, held during Fiji's independence celebrations in October 1970, that the SPF was actually 'born'.³⁷ At this stage, it was evident that the islanders were considering the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand in their proposed meeting. Stuart Inder commented that they 'considered it a good idea that the leaders meet regularly with Australia and NZ and discuss common problems and wants'.³⁸

35 Mara, 'The South Pacific Forum', p. 5.

36 Tupua Tamasese Lealofi IV, 'Opening Address by the Chairman: Twelfth South Pacific Conference and Thirty-Fifth Session of the South Pacific Commission', Unpublished conference paper, 1972.

37 Mara, 'The South Pacific Forum', p. 5.

38 Stuart Inder, 'Leading from the Rear is Still Leadership', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, September 1971: 27.

At the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference held in Singapore in January 1971, Western Samoa, Fiji and Tonga sought support for their protest against the French nuclear tests. Forsyth argues that

the slightly dusty answer they got almost certainly strengthened their feeling that it might be time to think about some platform of their own, additional to the Commonwealth and SPC.³⁹

Forsyth's argument was supported by the fact that immediately after his return from the Prime Ministers' Conference, Tamasese Lealofi IV called publicly for a meeting of island leaders to discuss matters of interest to them.⁴⁰ The *Fiji Times* reported that his statement had the support of Ratu Mara of Fiji and Hammer DeRoburt of Nauru.⁴¹

The leaders of the independent states took their shared idea of establishing their own organisation a stage further in off-the-record discussions at the sixth PIPA meeting held in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, in April 1971. All the independent island states, except Nauru, which was not a member of PIPA, were present. They decided that Ratu Mara should approach the New Zealand prime minister to see whether he would host a meeting⁴² at which island leaders could discuss 'matters of interest to them within the region and in their involvement with Australia and New Zealand'.⁴³ They intended such a meeting to be an annual event. The New Zealand prime minister, Sir Keith Holyoake, announced in May 1971 that New Zealand would cooperate willingly with the islanders' plan.⁴⁴ New Zealand leaders had been advocating that the island leaders form their own organisation since late 1970. This was evident, for example, in a statement made by the Minister for Māori and Island Affairs, Duncan MacIntyre, in December 1970: '[W]hat many Islanders want, and what we should encourage, is a political forum where island countries can meet on equal terms with Australia and New Zealand.'⁴⁵

39 W.D. Forsyth, 'Wellington Conference Means New Era of Pacific Alliances', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1971: 12.

40 Robert Keith-Reid, 'Getting Tough in Tonga', *The Bulletin*, [Australia], 24 April 1971: 37.

41 Forsyth, 'Wellington Conference Means New Era of Pacific Alliances'.

42 Ratu Mara later said the reason for choosing Wellington for the first meeting was to avoid accusations that Fiji was 'trying to usurp the leadership of the island region'. See Mara, 'The South Pacific Forum', p. 11.

43 Ratu Mara, quoted in 'Pacific Leaders Make Nukualofa a Get-together to Remember', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1971: 23.

44 Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 18.

45 W.D. MacIntyre, cited in M. Margaret Ball, 'Regionalism and the Pacific Commonwealth', *Pacific Affairs*, 46(2), 1973: 232-53, at p. 243.

M. Margaret Ball argues that 'New Zealand was obviously anxious to promote the Forum idea, but the formal initiative came from the Islanders'.⁴⁶ The use of the word 'formal' here is misleading as it implies that it was not in fact an islander initiative. The facts point to the SPF idea being not only formally, but also actually, an islander initiative. Islanders' discussions of the idea had already begun when the New Zealand leaders' statements began to appear. Australia also welcomed the islander initiative, and Australia's foreign minister Leslie Bury said Australia would make facilities available for a future meeting. Although the leaders of all five independent Pacific countries were involved with the establishment of the SPF, some played a more significant role than others. Albert Henry of the Cook Islands, Ratu Mara of Fiji and Tamasese of Western Samoa were particularly active. Forsyth describes Henry as 'the Islands leader probably most entitled to the credit of initiating publicly the idea of an Islands political forum'. Henry's views were made known to other island leaders during 1969 and 1970. Forsyth claims:

[I]t has been easier ... for Mr. Henry to take the lead as the Cook Islands have not been involved in the past history of rivalry and reservations which has affected relations between Tonga, Samoa and Fiji.

He also draws attention to the fact that Henry was the president of PIPA when it met in Nuku'alofa in April 1971. This, he argues, 'doubtless ... helped to bring about the agreement ... to go ahead with the project for a forum'.⁴⁷ Tamasese's main contribution was to make a public statement calling for a meeting of island leaders on his return from the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in January 1971. Ratu Mara's role was to approach the New Zealand prime minister about hosting the first forum meeting. The other two 'founding' leaders did not play active parts. Inder described DeRoburt of Nauru as 'not nearly so interested in the intricacies of political affiliations and inter-government relationships as, say, Ratu Mara and Mr Albert Henry'. Further, he argues:

Nauru turned up to the Forum with probably even less of an inkling of its possible direction than anyone. Nauru has been a loner, with little time available for, or understanding of the need to mend fences in her own region.⁴⁸

46 *ibid.*, p. 243.

47 Forsyth, 'South Pacific', p. 19.

48 Inder, 'Leading from the Rear is Still Leadership'.

Foundation principles

When the heads of government of the five independent Pacific island states assembled for the first South Pacific Forum in the parliament buildings in Wellington in August 1971, it was already clear, in general terms, what ideas they were seeking to promote. As we have seen, these were the same people who for some years had been involved in the annual conferences of the SPC and who had established PIPA, in which they had met since 1965. They had also recently been together at Fiji's independence celebrations in October 1970 and at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in Singapore in January 1971. In each of these forums, they had made it known to each other, and to a wider audience, that it was time for a fundamental departure in the principles and practice of regional cooperation.⁴⁹

The individuals concerned were exceptional leaders in national and regional politics. Ratu Mara was an impressive paramount chief who had already established his regional leadership credentials in the campaign to decolonise the structures of the SPC and in his initiative in establishing PIPA. Tamasese held one of the four high chiefly titles of Western Samoa. Henry did not have the high chiefly status of the others but made up for it with his noted oratorical and political skills, honed in trade union politics in New Zealand and on the political hustings in Cook Islands. The two other founding leaders were less prominent in the development and promotion of the new regionalist principles but were nevertheless important players. Tonga's Prince Tu'ipelehake, the brother of the King, had been prime minister since 1965, and DeRoburt, president of Nauru since 1968, had been head chief of his people since 1956 and tenaciously led the successful campaign for independence against a reluctant Australian Government during the 1960s.

The main principle underlying the forum initiative was that of self-determination in regional affairs. In this regard, the establishment of the SPF represented the culmination of a political process rather than a beginning. As we have seen, the representatives of Pacific island territories had been involved, since the early 1960s, in a campaign to decolonise the power structure in the colonial regional organisation, the SPC. The principle of self-determination was seen, then, as a prior concern of

49 The standard works on the formation and subsequent activities of the SPC are Smith, *South Pacific Commission*; Herr, 'Regionalism in the South Seas'; and Forsyth, 'South Pacific'.

regional cooperation and the SPF was the most sophisticated institutional expression of it. To underscore this principle, it was not enough that the proposed organisation overcome the constraints on political discussions in the SPC or be structured in such a way that there was equality among members. It was also regarded as essential that only sovereign island states, and Australia and New Zealand, be allowed to participate, thus excluding the dependent territories and the other metropolitan powers, France, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The idea of including Australia and New Zealand in the cooperative process seemed to some observers to abrogate the self-determination principle. If this was to be a move away from colonial governance, why include two countries that were still colonial powers and the main economic forces in the island region? Should not the postcolonial states form their own collective to determine their position in relation to these regional powers, as had occurred in South-East Asia, the Caribbean and Africa? The island leaders recognised that it might appear an unusual step but saw it as a necessary one if they were to maximise their influence over the terms of engagement with these countries. Ratu Mara, for example, later asserted:

We were happy to be joined by Australia and New Zealand in the Forum ... Indeed, we wanted them for a special reason. For part of the ambitious plan of the Forum ... was no less than to alter the whole balance of the terms of trade.⁵⁰

While the invitation to Australia can be thought of mainly in pragmatic terms, the inclusion of New Zealand was also based on some feelings of close affinity. New Zealand was perceived as having more empathy with the island region. It had a significant Polynesian population, it had been supportive of islander initiatives to reform the SPC and some of the island leaders had close personal and educational links with New Zealand. It was also known that New Zealand's leaders were interested in exploring new multilateral arrangements for dealing with what was fast becoming a postcolonial South Pacific.⁵¹ Significantly, it was New Zealand prime minister Holyoake whom Ratu Mara approached on behalf of the other island leaders about hosting the first SPF.

50 Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, 'Grail Address', Corpus Christi College, Suva, January 1973, as cited in Sandra Tarte, 'Fiji's Role in the South Pacific Forum, 1971-1984', BA(Hons) thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, October 1985.

51 Mary Boyd, 'Introduction', in Mary Boyd, ed., *Pacific Horizons: A Regional Role for New Zealand*, Wellington: Price Milburn for the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1972, pp. 7-17, at pp. 9-10; and Ken Piddington, *South Pacific Forum: The First 15 Years*, Suva: South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation, 1986, p. 6.

Further decolonisation of the SPC, 1972–78

The successful creation of their own regional organisation encouraged, rather than deterred, the efforts of Pacific island leaders to decolonise what they saw as the ‘exclusive club’ of the SPC. Ratu Mara renewed his attack at the 1972 South Pacific Conference when he asked: ‘Why should the gentlemen who sit in Paris and in Washington be deciding the pace and extent of the development of the people in this region?’⁵² R.G. Ward, an observer at the conference, reported:

It was clear at the 12th Conference that virtually all the island territories and most of the metropolitan ‘Participating Governments’ were anxious to see changes in the organisation of the SPC so that the Islanders could have more direct control over the work of the Commission.⁵³

The Australian delegation placed a proposal aimed at quelling this anxiety before the 1973 conference. The proposal suggested a ‘*de facto* merger of the Commission and Conference’, which, inter alia, ‘should reduce any resentments of Conference members at having their recommendations subject to the approval of a body largely comprised of “metropolitan powers”’.⁵⁴ It was proposed that territories and participating governments should each have one vote. The Australian delegation suggested that the change be effected by convention rather than going through the difficult process of getting all participating governments to agree to alter the Canberra Agreement. The Australian proposal, however, still included a provision that maintained the ultimate authority of the participating governments. A participating government could demand in relation to any particular issue that only participating government votes be counted. In the words of the Australian paper to the conference, ‘this, hopefully, would be an extreme step that would rarely, if ever, be taken’.⁵⁵

52 R.G. Ward, ‘Report on South Pacific Commission Conference’, Unpublished report, Canberra, 1972, p. 1.

53 R.G. Ward, ‘Report on the Thirteenth South Pacific Conference, Guam and a Visit to Manila, September 1973’, Unpublished report, Canberra, 1973.

54 Australian Government, *Possible Changes in the Functioning of the South Pacific Commission*, Working Paper No. 4, Presented to Thirteenth South Pacific Conference, Guam, 1–20 September 1973, p. 3.

55 *ibid.*, s. 13.

In the discussion of the proposal by the South Pacific Conference, island delegates made it clear that they would not tolerate anything short of full acceptance of the Australian proposal. France's reluctance to accept change sparked bitter comments from some island delegates. Albert Maori Kiki of Papua New Guinea told the conference that 'it was time for the delegates from colonial governments to "shut up" and let the Pacific Islanders get on with their job'. Bikenibeu Paeniu of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands said the SPC must come under the control of the island governments, and Joe Williams of the Cook Islands commented:

[I]f France continued to object to the reforms then the Cook Islands would propose that the Commission session be abolished altogether and the Conference put officially in full charge of the SPC.⁵⁶

The conference set up the Future Status Committee to examine ways of implementing the principles espoused in the Australian proposal. The committee accepted the proposal and tabled a resolution that was accepted by the conference, calling on Australia to

initiate discussion immediately with all participating governments at the highest appropriate level to revise the Canberra Agreement in such a way that it will reflect the needs and aspirations of the Pacific people.⁵⁷

The committee retained the safeguard clause for the participating governments, pending alteration of the Canberra Agreement, and expressed the hope that it would not be invoked. In response to the conference's request, Australia arranged a joint review meeting of participating governments of the SPC in Wellington in March 1974. The meeting approved a memorandum of understanding that was signed by participating governments during the subsequent South Pacific Conference in October.⁵⁸

The memorandum instituted important structural change without formal amendment of the Canberra Agreement. Under the new arrangements, the SPC and the South Pacific Conference were to meet in joint session at

56 'All—Except France—Agog for Change—In South Pacific Commission', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, October 1973: 7.

57 SPC, *Report of the 'Future Status' Committee, Thirteenth South Pacific Conference*, Nouméa: SPC Secretariat, September 1973.

58 The text of the memorandum is contained in SPC, *Report of the Fourteenth South Pacific Conference*, Nouméa: SPC, 1974, Annex C, pp. 42–4.

which each country (whether a participating government or a dependent territory) would have one vote. The new joint session, the conference, assumed most of the functions of the SPC—the executive body under the old arrangements. The SPC was reconstituted as a committee of the conference (the Committee of Representatives of Participating Governments, CRPG). The CRPG retained the power to approve the administrative budget and to nominate the principal officers of the SPC. Thus, it did not operate strictly as a committee of the conference. The other major change was the establishment of the Planning and Evaluation Committee, whose function it was to examine the draft work program prior to South Pacific Conference meetings. Significantly, all members of the conference were entitled to representation on this committee.

The arrangements under the memorandum represented the culmination of a decade of demands by island leaders for a more significant role for the South Pacific Conference within the SPC's structure. Although certain powers were retained by the reconstituted SPC (the CRPG), the conference had now become the governing body in the organisation. In view of the fact that, under the pre-memorandum rules, the SPC was the executive body and the conference had only an advisory function, the new arrangements constituted a reversal of roles.

The fifteenth South Pacific Conference (in Nauru in 1975) was the first to operate under the new rules. Ratu Mara dispelled any thought that the memorandum should be construed as having satisfied all islander complaints concerning metropolitan influence within the SPC. He attacked the control that donor countries might exercise over SPC programs through their voluntary contributions to special projects. The metropolitan participating governments, in particular, had been giving voluntary contributions outside their normal budgetary contribution. These voluntary contributions were tagged for particular projects. Ratu Mara argued that the people in the region, not SPC staff and donor countries, should decide where funds should be spent. Ratu Mara also criticised the SPC's work program, claiming it was irrelevant to the needs of the people. His criticisms became a rallying point for other speakers. The object of their attacks was the work program and, by implication, and at times by specific reference, the metropolitan countries and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, which they held responsible.⁵⁹

59 This section is based on personal observations made at the fifteenth conference. They are developed in Gregory E. Fry, 'Report on the Fifteenth South Pacific Conference held in Nauru, 29 September to 10 October 1975', Unpublished report, Canberra, February 1976.

The mood of dissatisfaction culminated in the decision to hold a review conference in May 1976 to 'conduct an exhaustive re-evaluation of the total functions and organisation of the South Pacific Commission'.⁶⁰ The review committee's recommendations did not, however, substantially affect the structure of the SPC.⁶¹ They emphasised certain functional areas on which the SPC should concentrate but these did not mark an important departure from past practice. The most important recommendation concerned the structure of the secretariat. It was suggested that the division of the work program into the separate categories of health, social development and economic development be discontinued. It was further suggested that the divisions within the secretariat corresponding to these functional areas be integrated into one unit. The committee also proposed that special projects be incorporated into the general work program—a suggestion that answered Ratu Mara's demands at the fifteenth conference. The review committee's recommendations were all agreed to by the sixteenth conference (in Nouméa in 1976).

A remaining anomaly in post-memorandum arrangements was the plural voting system in use in the CRPG. This system had been in use in the SPC since 1964 and was carried over into the CRPG. The introduction of plural voting had been a condition of France's support for Western Samoa's admission to SPC membership. Under this arrangement, a participating government's number of votes depended on the number of Pacific territories it represented. Thus, France and the United Kingdom were entitled to more votes than, say, Fiji, which was entitled to only one. This created the possibility of metropolitan dominance of the CRPG. Before any significant public expression of islander dissatisfaction could be voiced, the metropolitan powers announced an end to this system, at the 1976 South Pacific Conference.⁶²

The attack on what were seen as residual elements of metropolitan dominance did not rest there. At the seventeenth conference (in Pago Pago in 1977), Papua New Guinea's foreign minister, Ebia Olewale, led a critical discussion on the restrictive qualifications for membership of the inner group of the SPC (those who had acceded to the Canberra Agreement and had thereby qualified for membership of the CRPG).

60 SPC, *Report of the Fifteenth South Pacific Conference*, Nouméa: SPC, 1975, Resolution 23.

61 See SPC, *Report of the SPC Review Committee, Nauru, 3–7 May 1976*, Nouméa: SPC, 1976.

62 'South Pacific Commission: Sixteenth South Pacific Conference', *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, November 1976, p. 612.

It was proposed that the agreement be amended to allow all non-self-governing territories to become participating governments. Olewale commented:

[W]e are no longer in the 40s and 50s when the SPC was regarded as a rich man's club, in which important decisions are made by a small group of people. We can't afford to let this go on.⁶³

Even though the SPC had been terminated by the memorandum of understanding, the islanders' statements indicated that they viewed the new CRPG as retaining important functions in which dependent Pacific territories could not participate. The CRPG indicated a willingness to go part of the way in satisfying this demand. At the eighteenth South Pacific Conference (in Nouméa in 1978), they notified their intention to amend the Canberra Agreement to allow the accession of countries which had attained a constitutional status in which they were in 'free association with a fully independent Government'.⁶⁴

At the 1978 conference, there was evidence of continuing opposition to what was perceived as undue metropolitan influence on SPC affairs. Australia provoked the anger of island delegates by referring matters to Canberra for decision and keeping the rest of the conference waiting in so doing.⁶⁵ The first occasion was on the question of Tuvalu's accession to the Canberra Agreement. Tuvalu, as a newly independent Pacific country, had qualified to become a participating government in the SPC. The motion inviting Tuvalu to accede to the Canberra Agreement was approved by all member countries except Australia, whose representative said he would have to refer the matter to Canberra for approval. This meant that the decision on Tuvalu's accession had to be delayed for three days. The second occasion concerned a motion on civil aviation. Australia was once again the only country not in a position to give its immediate concurrence. Referring to the Australian actions, the Fijian delegate, Livai Nasilivata, asked:

63 J. Carter, 'Horrid Niggling, or Happy Nuptials, for Commission and Forum?', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1977: 10.

64 SPC, *Report of the Eighteenth South Pacific Conference*, Nouméa: SPC, 1978, Item 17, p. 26.

65 These views on the 1978 conference are based on personal observation. They are developed in Gregory E. Fry, 'Report on the Eighteenth South Pacific Conference', Unpublished report, Canberra, 1978. The events described are also reported in C. Ashton, 'Australia Takes a Beating', *The Bulletin*, [Australia], 24 October 1978: 21-2; and in R. Hawkins, 'The Hot Politics of a "Routine" Conference', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, December 1978: 26-9.

[H]ow much longer are we, the island countries and, in fact, ministers representing island peoples at this conference, to allow ourselves to be treated in this insulting and paternalistic way by some of our partners?⁶⁶

Fiji's attack on Australia was supported by other island delegates. It was not merely the fact that the conference had been kept waiting that angered islander delegates, nor that a delegation had to cable home for instructions. It is evident that at the core of the Fijian objection was the fact that it was a metropolitan country that was doing these things. The appearance was of a conference waiting for a decision to be taken in a metropolitan capital. This was too much of a reminder of a past when metropolitan powers had much more influence.

The events at the 1978 conference indicated that islander leaders were still very sensitive to any metropolitan actions that might be construed as trying to unduly influence the operation of this organisation. This sensitivity remained despite the structural changes, and the changes in work programs and procedures, which gave islanders effective control of the SPC. For many islanders, the SPC would always be seen as an organisation created by the colonial powers and therefore not to be regarded in the same way as 'homegrown' institutions. The presence of metropolitan countries in the South Pacific Conference and the CRPG, and the fact that these countries provided nearly all of the SPC's budget, contributed to a feeling among islanders that whatever changes were made to the SPC, it was still not really theirs. Indeed, in the following decade, some Pacific leaders saw the only solution as being to terminate the SPC and to support instead the institutions they had created themselves.

Sovereignty and regional self-determination

The development of formal regional governance structures based on self-determination principles resulted from the political change within Pacific territories. For those approaching state sovereignty, it also reinforced that national sovereignty. In making statehood the criterion for a seat at the regional table of decision-making, self-determination was equated with sovereign statehood. If colonial regionalism had been dominated by colonial powers, the new regionalism would be determined by postcolonial

66 Ashton, 'Australia Takes a Beating', p. 22.

states. The new legitimating principles for regional governance were particularly important in entrenching the sovereignty of associated states. The Cook Islands and Niue had chosen associated statehood rather than independence to continue the advantages of access to New Zealand. This legal status was new in world politics and it became a work in progress for these territories to establish their actual international status. Regional membership established their credentials as international players. Thus, rather than regional governance competing with national sovereignty, the two were mutually constitutive.

But there was a tension inherent in this regional self-determination principle. In setting up political independence as the criterion for full political agency in the new regional society of states, access was denied to those who were content with limited self-government as the end point of decolonisation. As we will see in Chapter 7, this created a tension and contest between independent countries and dependent territories—for example, with Guam and French Polynesia—in the regional arena. While independent countries saw them as belonging to one regional family, they had to be seen to earn their place at the regional decision-making table by first gaining independence. Under the new principles, regional self-determination was extended to all Pacific island peoples, while political agency rested only with those who had an independent state. We return to this tension between identity and agency in Chapter 7.

This also affected sovereignty and anticolonial movements, which wanted to go as far as they could with decolonisation but were limited by being a minority in a larger state. This was the case in West Papua, New Caledonia and Hawai`i. In such cases, recognition by the regional forum of having a right to speak was enormously important in terms of international support for domestic struggles. But while the regional identity embraced by the independent states included the dependent territories, it did not generally extend beyond the SPC's territorial area into the metropolitan countries. Regional support for such sovereignty movements would be supported, rather, by regional NGOs.

The equation of political agency within the new regional governance with state sovereignty also left out NGOs and, over time, was seen as reflecting an elitist top-down regionalism. It is to the broadening out of the postcolonial regional polity, and to the contradictions between agency and identity in 'the new South Pacific' of the 1970s and 1980s, that we now turn.

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