

Introduction

Independence in Papua New Guinea was marked by flurries of activity and stately rites, anxiety as well as elation. Formal celebrations were muted, even nervous, in Port Moresby. Hubert Murray Stadium commemorates a long-serving proconsul. There, on the eve of independence, the Australian flag was lowered with solemn respect. Michael Somare, Prime Minister-designate, hosted a dinner in a house above Fairfax Harbour, to watch the midnight fireworks. Speaking without notes and with rare passion, he paid tribute to his colleagues and his subordinates, then he turned to the Prime Minister of Australia. The two were at loggerheads over Australian aid but Somare ignored that issue to extol Gough Whitlam's role in bringing Australia's colonial role to a close. His praise was much more than courtesy required: Whitlam — an orator never lost for words — astounded his audience when they saw him weep.¹ For many in that room and elsewhere, the separation of Australia and Papua New Guinea was cathartic.

Across town, negotiations had to be completed before midnight to secure the future of the Ok Tedi copper mine. At midnight, judges and the Governor-General were sworn in, and the Finance Minister, Julius Chan, became the first naturalised citizen.² Overnight an out-of-season shower provided ambiguous omens. Next morning, the Southern Cross and Bird of Paradise flag was raised near the new Parliament House. With the lowering of one flag and the raising of another, Australia's Governor-General became almost as foreign as Imelda Marcos of the Philippines (whose ostentatiously late arrival caused the cancellation of a fly-past). Papua New Guinea was no longer an Australian Territory but a sovereign state.

To decolonise is to dismantle foreign control: independence is the achievement or recovery of sovereignty. These portentous words aligned Australia with European colonial powers and they added Papua New Guinea to the register of emancipated colonies. The rites of passage to independence had become familiar long before their reprise in Port Moresby. On the surface, this was a mere postscript to a global narrative.

But this uncoupling was unique. For one thing, these rituals decolonised both countries. Whitlam held broad objections to colonial relationships, including Australia's residual links to imperial Britain. Believing that colonialism demeaned the coloniser as well as the colonised, he later reflected that 'Australia was never truly free until Papua New Guinea became free'.³ Such freedom, however, implied a degree of separation that was unlikely in view of the history, the geography and the economies of the two neighbours. For millennia, Australia and New Guinea formed one continent with distinctive flora and marsupial animals, links that survived the drowning of Torres Strait. These

ancient ties were explained by Alfred Russel Wallace in *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang Utan and Bird of Paradise*.⁴ Scholars refuse to call this lost continent Greater Australia (or Greater New Guinea), so the obscure ‘Sahul’ is its usual name (see Map 2).⁵

The partition of Sahul is incomplete. Torres Strait, which separates New Guinea from Australia, is narrower and shallower than Bass Strait, which makes Tasmania an island. Islands and shoals jeopardise east-west navigation through Torres Strait, but they assist north-south movement. Some of the connections between Australia and the islands were expressed in the term ‘Australasia’. In 1828, Sydney politician W. C. Wentworth published his survey of *Australasia* and called himself an Australasian. Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the propagandist of planned colonisation, defined Australasia as ‘Australia and all the smaller islands in its neighbourhood’.⁶ Queensland planters saw the islands as a source of cheap labour, and a Queensland magistrate tried to annex eastern New Guinea in 1883. In 1890, the Victorian Parliament treated Australasia as the mainland, New Zealand, Tasmania, Fiji ‘and any other British Colonies or possessions in Australasia, now existing or hereafter to be created’.⁷ The term expressed a British and colonial state of mind as well as a geographical entity, and it embraced the south-eastern quarter of the island of New Guinea, which became a British Protectorate in 1884.

Despite these links, a popular Australian account in 1965 saw the island of New Guinea as ‘the last unknown’.⁸ Tortuous terrain, malaria and the absence of obvious resources had delayed European exploration until the 1880s (and the densely populated Highlands were mapped only in the 1930s). A rash publisher printed the record of an expedition to New Guinea in 1872 that found kingdoms, fabulous wealth and a mountain higher than Everest. David Glen judges that such fantasies were informed by the traditions of European exploration, which saw New Guinea ‘somewhere between the harsh and wild African interior and a softer Pacific vision of tropical paradise’.⁹ In the next few decades, outsiders’ images did evolve, but they always emphasised the ‘otherness’ of New Guinea — physical as well as social. The dry, flat Australian continent was mainly temperate, while the wet tropical territory crumpled into mountain ranges that fed tumultuous rivers.

When the Australian colonies federated in 1901, the name first proposed for that federation was Australasia. Fiji had been part of the Federal Councils of the 1880s, but none of Britain’s island possessions were invited to the negotiations, and New Zealand backed out. Australasia survived as a scientific term but withered in political discourse.¹⁰ The Federal Constitution mentions a responsibility for Pacific Islands, but close relations did not develop between Australians and Melanesians (as they began to be called). When Commonwealth governments began to define Australians, they were inspired by the vision of a ‘white Australia’, peopled by Europeans, so most islanders were expelled.¹¹ Prospectors scoured the islands for gold but the usual focus of Australian interest was strategic, especially when Russian, French or German ships crossed the horizon. Hunger for gold and fear of foreigners shaped Australian policies.

The first Attorney-General of Australia, Alfred Deakin, told readers of the London *Morning Post* that ‘the Australian’ looked at French and German colonies in the region ‘nearly in the light of an intrusion on his property’. Deakin’s typical Australian was so

self-assured that he ‘views the Continent behind him ... as too contracted for his operations, and by no means as confining his sphere of influence’.¹² This, says Hank Nelson, was the voice of

a young Australia confident of its right to expand influence beyond the continent, resentful of those who had got there first, and beginning to assert a national, rather than an empire, perspective.¹³

Once the Australians federated, Britain was keen to hand over British New Guinea. When Prime Minister Edmund Barton agreed, he spoke of ‘the long centuries for which I hope New Guinea is to be a territory, perhaps, a State of this Commonwealth’, and he thought other islands might also be acquired.¹⁴ Deakin was more realistic about an enduring contradiction: ‘A “White Australia” may exist, across the straits, but a “Black New Guinea” the territory now is and must always remain.’¹⁵

Despite the grandiloquence, it was left to a handful of missionaries, planters and miners to embody Australians’ flickering interest in the Territory of Papua (the new name of British New Guinea), under the frail protection of an embryonic state. Australia’s ambition was little more than strategic denial — the exclusion of other European powers — and the Great War allowed an expeditionary force to realise this ambition by expelling Germans from New Guinea. Ex-German New Guinea was administered separately from ex-British New Guinea, but both were Australian Territories. The War in the Pacific, from 1941 to 1945, underlined their importance to Australian security. When peace returned, Australia created a joint administration over Papua and New Guinea, and devoted a great deal more attention to it.

Australians and Melanesians seldom met. Australians enjoyed easy access to the Territory, while Melanesians visited Australia only as servants or students. In the little towns of the Territory, segregation was the organising principle, and the two populations might as well have inhabited different worlds.¹⁶ Melanesians were the least urban people on Earth; Australians the most urbanised (neither group saw itself as urbane). Australians expected high incomes, democratic and bureaucratic structures and values, publicly funded schools, hospitals and transport. Unlike their neighbours, they were monolingual and monocultural and their diet was rich in protein. If they thought about Melanesians, they saw them as ‘primitive’ at worst and always ‘natives’. Natives spoke primitive lingoes and worshipped ancestors or idols. They did not need, nor could they appreciate, the benefits of modernity. Contrasting ways of living seemed to justify the application of Australian law to Australians and simple Native Regulations to ‘natives’.

Australian economists were dismayed when they began to quantify the lives of Papua New Guinea’s two million people. After half a century of Australian influence, in the early 1960s the World Bank recorded less than £20 million worth of exports and imports worth £30 million. Australian grants covered three-quarters of official receipts. Plantations needed few skilled workers. Only half of each cohort went to school, and they did not stay long.¹⁷ People were barred from visiting town, wearing Western clothes, drinking alcohol, or emulating Australians. The thrust of policy was not to bridge difference but to preserve

it. ‘The Territory’ was not yet a country. Although the law defined its people as Australians, they were not citizens. As J. D. B. Miller pointed out, the Territory’s development posed every possible difficulty:

The obvious features ... are the lack of anything approaching national unity; the lack of a local elite; an economy with little to sell; a government which is necessarily expensive; a heavy dependence upon Australian subsidies; [and] an incalculable neighbour in the shape of Indonesia.¹⁸

There were few challenges to Australian rule. Ambiguity shrouded the Territory’s destiny, since the term implied that (like the Northern Territory) it might evolve into a state of the Commonwealth. Its future was clarified only in 1966 when a Papua New Guinean delegation asked if they could become Australia’s seventh state. That was unthinkable; white and black Australians were not equal before the law, the goal of ‘White Australia’ governed migration, and a welfare state cosseted white citizens. Cabinet recoiled from the vision and resolved that Papua New Guinea’s destiny was separation, so the goal of Papua New Guinea’s independence was stated first as an Australian rejection.

The pace of change quickened when Whitlam, as Leader of the Labor Party, began to advocate independence. By 1970, Prime Minister John Gorton was converted. Conservatives on both sides of Torres Strait doubted that Papua New Guinea was ready for independence. So did separatists. When Cabinet ruled out statehood, the Territory House of Assembly splintered. Papua’s members sought a separate status, and so did some Bougainvilleans and some Tolai around Rabaul.

Papua New Guinea was still an Australian Territory. Responsibility lay with a minister in Canberra, and services were provided by Commonwealth agencies. The largest bloc in the Territory House of Assembly, the United Party, feared devolution — and an obstructive House could paralyse change. To the chagrin of the United Party and the delight of Australians, however, Territory elections in February 1972 yielded a coalition committed to devolution, led by Michael Somare and Julius Chan. Somare became de facto Chief Minister and an enthusiastic partner in the transfer of powers.

The direction of change was settled, but not the pace. When Labor came to power in Australia later that year, Whitlam confirmed his insistence on unity and 1974 as his target date for independence.¹⁹ With internal self-government in 1973, Bill Morrison, as Minister for External Territories, abolished his department, transferring its residual powers to the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Somare was the focus of huge and contrary pressures from Australia, from his own coalition and from a Constitutional Planning Committee. Placating impatient Australians, reassuring anxious Highlanders and holding an angular coalition together, the fledgling Cabinet also negotiated a constitution, defused secession, created policy and planning capacity, and transformed the Public Service. This took longer than Whitlam expected, but the goal was reached, breathlessly, in September 1975.

Or was it? Many people say that independence came too soon; others accept that the timing was about right, and a few insist that it was overdue. However, developments in the past 30 years beg the question: is ‘independence’ the appropriate term for what happened in 1975?

Footnotes

1. Interview, Mark Lynch.
2. Interview, Ross Garnaut.
3. ‘Freedom for Australia too’, *The Australian*, September 16, 1975.
4. Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang Utan and Bird of Paradise*, London, 1874; and *The Geographical Distribution of Animals*, London, 1876.
5. Chris Ballard, ‘Stimulating Minds to Fantasy? A Critical Etymology for Sahul’, in M. A. Smith, M. Spriggs and B. Fankhauser (eds), *Sahul in Review*, ANU, 1993.
6. These usages are cited in *The Australian National Dictionary*, Melbourne, 1988.
7. Edward Morris, *Austral English: a dictionary of Australasian words, phrases and usages*, London, 1898.
8. Gavin Souter, *New Guinea: the last unknown*, Sydney, 1965.
9. David Glen, ‘The Last Elusive Object’, MA thesis, ANU, 2000, chapter 1, referring to John A. Lawson, R. N., *Wanderings in the Interior of New Guinea*, Chapman Hall, London, 1875.
10. John Hirst, *Sentimental Nation: the Making of the Australian Constitution*, Melbourne, 2000; James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Penguin, Auckland, 2001, p46ff.
11. Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Port Moresby, IPNGS, 1985.
12. Hank Nelson, ‘Frontiers, Territories and States of Mind’, in D. Denoon (ed.), *Emerging from Empire?*, citing Alfred Deakin, *Federated Australia: Selections from Letters to the Morning Post 1900–1910*, Melbourne University Press, 1968, edited and introduced by J. A. La Nauze, pp. v, xv. Quotation from *Morning Post*, March 19, 1901.
13. Hank Nelson, ‘Frontiers, Territories and States of Mind’.
14. *Australian Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, Vol. 6, 1901–02, pp. 7079–91.
15. Alfred Deakin, *Federated Australia*, p. 85; *Morning Post*, December 31, 1901.
16. Amirah Inglis, *Not a White Woman Safe: Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby, 1920–1934*, ANU Press, 1974.
17. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development [the ‘World Bank’], *The Economic Development of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1965; John Langmore, ‘A Critical Assessment of Australian economic policy for Papua New Guinea between 1945 and 1970’, mimeo, Department of Economics, University of Papua New Guinea, 1972; Donald Denoon, ‘Capitalism in Papua New Guinea’, *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. XX, No. 3–4, 1985, pp. 119–34.
18. J. D. B. Miller, ‘Australia’s Difficulties in New Guinea’, ANU seminar paper, November 1965, reprinted in *Journal of Pacific History*, 2005.
19. Whitlam’s speech is cited by David Hegarty in the January–April 1973 section of Clive Moore with Mary Kooyman (ed.), *A Papua New Guinea Political Chronicle 1967–1991*, Bathurst, NSW, 1998.