Preface

I knew little of Papua New Guinea when my family and I arrived in 1972 from Idi Amin's Uganda. One colleague at Makerere University had told us about cargo cults[1] and another had shown us *Gardens of War*,[2] the photo-essay on the Dugum Dani in Irian Jaya. These books portray cultural complexity and physical vigour, but no 'modern' politics or economics, so we were ill-prepared for the realities of Melanesian societies, Australian rule and the interactions between them.

Formal political life focused on Port Moresby, a dusty town of 100,000 people in a shadow that shielded it from the rains that drenched the rest of the country. It was obviously the administrative centre, whose distinct segments illustrated social and political relations in the dependent Territory. Along the Coral Sea coast and around Fairfax Harbour lived the first-comers, Motu-speaking villagers, whose stilted houses and walkways jutted over the water. They were the first to weigh the costs and benefits of interacting with Europeans. British and Polynesian evangelists brought unfamiliar infections, and later new therapies. Destroyed during the Pacific War, the villages had been rebuilt. They were the first villages to be formed into local government councils and cooperatives; and their young men and women worked in the first clerical and para-professional jobs opened to Melanesians. Looking down on these villages were the homes of missionaries and the hot little offices of public servants in Konedobu, the centre of administration.

The Owen Stanley Range largely isolated Port Moresby from the rest of island New Guinea, whereas Fairfax Harbour allowed easy access for Australian shipping. Inland from Konedobu and Korobosea Village was Boroko, a shopping centre and suburb for middle-ranking public servants. Their houses were raised above the ground and were cooled by ceiling fans and louvred windows. Boroko expanded as Port Moresby's population grew in step with the other Australian capital, Canberra. Inland from Boroko, in June Valley and Waigani, new buildings foreshadowed an independent country: the Administrative College, the university and offices for bureaucrats moving from Konedobu. Around them clustered the houses of their staff and the squatter settlements of migrants from the countryside, labourers, servants and their families.

There was little explicit hostility between these communities, although elderly Papuan men often stepped off the pavement to avoid colliding with white women.[3] More evident than this residue of colonial racism were tensions between settled coastal communities and migrants in the new suburbs and squatter settlements. That tension expressed suspicions between Papuans and New Guineans, and between coastal people and Highlanders.[4]

Shortly before we arrived, the territory held its third election under adult suffrage. Out of many parties and factions, the young Michael Somare built a majority coalition for early self-government and independence, edging out the conservative United Party. In Australia, the Liberal Government shared Somare's ambition, and the young Minister for Territories, Andrew Peacock, enjoyed warm relations with Papua New Guinea's leaders. The Labor Party was even more eager. When Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister of Australia at the end of 1972, he declared that independence should be celebrated (or at any rate achieved) within two years. This scenario seemed fanciful while all major decisions were still made in Canberra, the territory lacked any capacity to make policy, the House of Assembly was a rubber stamp and there were only a handful of Papua New Guinean graduates.

This alignment of forces was baffling to anyone — such as myself — brought up in the violence of apartheid and electrified by the drama of *uhuru* in Kenya, *ujamaa* in Tanzania[5] and the murderous anarchy of Idi Amin. Roles were surely confused? But no: Australians were united in their desire to decolonise, although Papua New Guineans were nervous of independence. Equally startling was the optimism of my new colleagues, who expected Papua New Guineans to learn from, and avoid, the violence, the autocracy and the corruption that they saw in newly independent Africa. But events seemed to justify that wide-eyed confidence. Within three years, Somare's coalition reorganised the Public Service, negotiated an aid package and renegotiated an important mining agreement. They drafted, debated and enacted a constitution, and created a planning capacity, a defence force and all the other limbs of a modern state. Secession was averted in Bougainville and in Papua, an explosive land dispute was defused around Rabaul, anxious Highlanders were mollified and the fragile coalition held together. Pessimists had expected bloodshed, perhaps on the scale of Congo. With peaceful independence, the optimists were vindicated: the coup that overthrew a government took place not in Port Moresby but in Canberra.

In the euphoria of 1975, decolonisation was a triumph. Ten years later, some of the gloss had worn off[6] and, by the 1990s, there were doubts about the capacity of the State to function. The army was mired in civil war, an economic crisis had been precipitated by the closure of the Panguna copper mine, several provincial governments had failed, Parliament was unstable, the Public Service was politicised and demoralised, and scandals circulated around squandered resources. Long before the civil war ground to a halt in 1997, the optimists were routed. Commissions of inquiry routinely reported confusion and peculation. In 2004, Australia and Papua New Guinea negotiated an increased aid bill and an Enhanced Cooperation Package. Australians once again work in Papua New Guinea's government departments, the police and the army.

It is now commonplace for Australians to declare that Australia departed too soon or too fast. Allan Patience, Professor of Politics at the University of Papua New Guinea, attributes Australian worries about Papua New Guinea's 'failing state' partly to 'the frankly horrifying rise in crime' and corruption. But he also denounces 'Australia's abysmal record as a colonial power and as an incompetent decoloniser'.[7] Some Papua New Guineans make the complementary point: in a letter to the *Post-Courier* newspaper,

'Grassroots' of Goroka asks if the people must 'keep suffering at the hands of the 109 MPs and cronies? Let the Australians come back and manage the country as part of Australia and let us, the bulk of the population, enjoy the basic services'.[8]

But today's pessimism is just as unbalanced as yesterday's optimism.[9] Europeans took centuries to weld their weak sovereigns, powerful churches and local fight-leaders into the kinds of state that we now take for granted. Corruption and mismanagement might be quite normal in state-formation. Despite immense problems, Papua New Guinea was well governed for at least a decade after 1975. We cannot assume that longer Australian tutelage would have produced better Melanesian governance, and Australians might have had less freedom of choice in the 1970s than the critics now suppose. Papua New Guinea did become independent in 1975, but I now see this as a phase in a much longer relationship, rather than the end of a turbulent story.

In tracing the evolution of Australian policy, I have enjoyed generous support. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade allowed me access to closed archives, and archivists in Australia and Papua New Guinea have been helpful. I owe an immense debt to lively students and patient colleagues at the University of Papua New Guinea. But my greatest debts are to participants in the decolonisation project, who shared their time, their memories and their mellow second thoughts. Many talked to me and many contributed to a 'Hindsight' workshop.[10] And Hank Nelson's studies of Papua New Guinea are absolutely indispensable.

Footnotes

1. Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, Schocken, New York, 1968; Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo: a study of the cargo movement in the southern Madang district*, Manchester University Press, 1964.
2. Robert Gardner and Karl Heider, *Gardens of War: Life and Death in the New Guinea Stone Age*, Random House, New York, 1968.
3. Amirah Inglis, *'Not a White Woman Safe': Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby, 1920–1934*, ANU Press, 1974.
4. Although Papua and New Guinea were administered jointly after the Pacific War, Papua (the south-eastern quadrant of the island of New Guinea) has been an Australian Territory since 1907, whereas New Guinea (the northeastern quadrant and the Bismarck Archipelago) had been a German colony until 1914 and was administered by Australia as a League of Nations Mandate from 1922 until the Pacific War.
5. In Swahili, 'uhuru' means freedom; 'ujamaa' means rural collectives.
6. Sione Latukefu (ed.), *Papua New Guinea: A Century of Colonial Impact, 1884–1984*, Port Moresby, 1985.
7. Allan Patience, 'What is Australia Really Up To?', *Post-Courier*, July 5, 2004.
8. *Post-Courier*, July 1, 2004.
9. Interview with Alan Kerr, who wonders what scandals the BBC might have reported when the Tudors were creating the English State, or when Napoleon was imposing a new order on France.
10. 'Hindsight: a Retrospective Workshop for Participants in the Decolonisation of Papua New Guinea', Australian National University, November 3–4, 2002, rspas.anu.edu.au/pah/publications/php