Sairusi, Tom, Mr Bechu Prasad, Sir Paul Reeves

Sairusi Nabogibogi. The name will mean little to the present generation of Fijians. But to those of us marching lock, stock and barrel into niggling middle age, the name was synonymous with violence, terror and unspeakable criminality. It was fearsome enough to send unruly children into blanket-wrapped silence in the menacing darkness of their thatched houses. Sairusi was a man of many parts: a charismatic criminal, a serial prison escapist, a proto-Fijian nationalist fiercely opposed to colonial rule and European dominance, a self-confessed admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, a fiction writer of talent, a self-proclaimed messiah and divinely ordained saviour of his people, in short a man of destiny. He was the undoubted hero of the Fijian underworld of the 1950s and 60s, much as Apolosi Nawai had been at the beginning of the 20th century. Now this once feared man and all that he claimed to stand for survives only in the fading memories of a passing generation.

Sairusi Nabogibogi, 5ft 8in tall, built a bit like the heavyweight boxer Sonny Liston with the ‘same air of brooding menace,’ as reporter Matt Wilson put it, was born on 2 September 1932 at Nakawakawa, Wainunu, Bua, son of Miriama Kadrudru of Nakawakawa and Josefa Nabogibogi from Nayavutoka, Ra. When he was only three, his father saw a vision of Sairusi as a returning messiah marked for great things. But his early career was unremarkable. He was educated at Ratu Kadavaulevu School and the Queen Victoria School, where Apisai Tora was among his contemporaries and with whom he formed a life-long, but not trouble-free, association. From high school, Sairusi went to the Nasinu Training College, but was expelled in 1949 for allegedly loitering around the women’s dormitory. Sairusi protested the drastic sentence, especially, he said, when other similar offenders were let off lightly or went unpunished. But as Sairusi was Sairusi, his fate was sealed. He told the Controller of Prisons later that ‘it was at this point he made up his mind deliberately to become Fiji’s worst-ever criminal.’ I am not sure if Sairusi used the word ‘criminal’ to describe himself—probably not—but that is what the records report.
Sairusi’s first serious brush with the law came in 1951 when he was charged with criminal trespass and larceny. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to nine months imprisonment. Released from prison on 10 May 1952, Sairusi returned to his old ways, becoming a ‘confirmed and expert burglar,’ in the words of the Fiji Intelligence Service which described him as the ‘smartest Fijian criminal in Suva.’ Throughout the 1950s, Sairusi continued to tempt fate and live dangerously at the edge. But his luck ran out when he was charged for a series of sexual assaults on European women in Suva. He denied the charge before the Suva Magistrate’s Court, claiming that he was being framed for his political beliefs, but he was convicted and committed to the Supreme Court for sentence. On 21 July 1958, Chief Justice Sir George Lowe, who would later chair the inquiry into the 1959 riots in Suva, sentenced Sairusi to eight years’ imprisonment and ordered that he, Sairusi, be kept under police surveillance for five years after his release. Sairusi appealed his sentence, without success. That embittered him deeply. He felt that ‘he had been savagely treated’ without being given a chance to reform. It was not only what Sairusi allegedly did that terrified the establishment; it was what it represented in the closed world of colonial society—a potent mix of race and sex and violence, a fear of the other, the crossing of sacrosanct boundaries—that perhaps weighed even more heavily on the minds of the officialdom. An example had to be made of him to deter others.

Incarcerated, Sairusi decided that he would not be a ‘normal’ prison inmate. He was sent to Suva Gaol but accused of trying to organise a breakout among the prisoners, was transferred to the Natabua Prison in Lautoka in April 1959. The transfer did not help. Sairusi quickly established himself as ‘the acknowledged leader of the prisoners,’ who was ‘virtually in charge of the gaol.’ How did this come about? Because Sairusi became a champion of racial equality. ‘When I went there [to prison], Fijians and Indians had a piece of sack to sleep on and one blanket, that’s all,’ he recalled in 1972, while European and Part-European inmates had mattresses, pillows and bed sheets. ‘We were all prisoners and we should all have had the same facilities.’ His agitation paid dividends, which endeared him to his inmates. He continued to break out almost at will, under the nose of the prison wardens, and return to his cell with cigarettes, books, and liquor. His cell, 7ft by 8ft, with a wooden bed and nothing else, became his sanctuary. ‘I did not listen to the radio,’ he recalled. ‘Sometimes I read all night.’ He refused release from solitary confinement half way through his sentence because ‘I wanted to be by myself and think and read.’

While in prison, Sairusi even managed to acquire a revolver and ammunition, though police also suspected someone else (his name I withhold) of being his accomplice. On 21 September, Sairusi appeared before the Senior Magistrate in
Lautoka on two counts of burglary and one of causing actual bodily harm, and sentenced to four years imprisonment. Sairusi, ever determined to be his own man, railing at the world around him, did not mend his ways. Perhaps he could not. He kept breaking out, flouting prison regulation. Rules and regulations and prison walls were for lesser mortals, not for him. Living dangerously, he paid the price. On 19 January 1960, Sairusi was sentenced to a further year’s imprisonment for breaking out of prison (and meeting other known criminals at the Lautoka Cemetery at night). Soon afterwards, he escaped from Natabua Gaol altogether.

On the run, Sairusi met up with an Indo-Fijian, let’s call him Bhaggu, a notorious Lautoka-born criminal operating in the Sabeto area, a kind of Al Capone, the police said, a ‘truly wicked man [who] operated an extremely profitable murder racket.’ Together, Bhaggu and Sairusi wreaked havoc in the cane belt, breaking-in, threatening violence, cowing people into submission on behalf of whoever paid them. Bhaggu, the hired gun, was convicted of gun running in 1963, and sentenced to eight years imprisonment (reduced on appeal to four years). Released in 1966, he was murdered by a young neighbour. Those who live by the sword die by the sword, you might say. On 12 July 1960, the Commissioner Western, Mr McAlpine, was shot while getting out of his car at his house in Lautoka. The police reported that the would-be assassin fired one round from a single-barrelled shot gun at point blank range hitting McAlpine in the stomach. As he lay doubled over, he fired another hurried shot missing him, and then ran away. McAlpine survived but had to be invalided out of colonial service. All fingers pointed to Sairusi as the suspected assailant, though probably the incident was masterminded by Bhaggu himself. No evidence linked Sairusi to the shooting, nor to the shooting of a Sabeto farmer, Varun Deo (not his real name) as he held his one year daughter in his hands. In the post-war years, Sabeto had the reputation as one of the most murderous places in Fiji, and especially dangerous during the bitter sugar cane strike of 1960. McAlpine’s shooting was, I suspect, linked to it.

Meanwhile, Sairusi’s reputation for performing mysterious deeds escalated. Many thought he was a magician. As the police reported, ‘it was even rumoured that he had a cloak which, when he put it on, rendered him invisible.’ Some even believed that ‘he could walk through walls as and when he wishes.’ At any rate, he was deemed a sufficient enough menace to be befriended (though probably not bought) by some Lautoka businessmen, as well as some prominent Fijians in the civil service who shared Sairusi’s anti-European views, including Apisai Tora and Ratu Mosese Varasikete. Even SM Koya, who often represented criminals in court in the 1960s, was reported credibly to have been in touch with Sairusi.
On 4 October 1960, at Apisai Tora’s request, Ratu Penaia Ganilau, then Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs, flew over to Lautoka to meet Sairusi. Sairusi had sought an audience with the high chief to deny any involvement in the shooting of McAlpine and Bhaggu and to demand a retrial of the 1958 court case against him. Nothing came of the meeting, which soured Sairusi’s attitude towards the Fijian hierarchy even further. He was convinced that he was more wronged against than wrong.

Sairusi then escaped to Suva, crashing through a police barrier at Lami. Once there, he again found himself in the familiar company of looters and criminals. ‘I really suffered during those ten months,’ he recalled. ‘Being an escaper is like living in a glass house. Everyone is watching you.’ His run ended on 31 March 1961, when acting on information, the police captured him at his father’s house in Raiwai. Although armed with a .22 rifle, Sairusi surrendered without a struggle. He pleaded guilty to unlawful escape from custody before the Acting Senior Magistrate on 22 May, but insisted that he had been punished for crimes he had not committed in the first place. ‘All sons of Fiji should get the same treatment whether red, black, white or yellow,’ he told the court. ‘My chiefs have let me down and this should stand as a guide for the future generations that they should not rely on any one person but only on the Almighty God.’ His reference to chiefs perhaps recalled his fruitless meeting with Ratu Sir Penaia.

Sairusi was sentenced and sent to the Suva Gaol under maximum security. He was mellower now, not the daredevil of his younger days. But his resentment at alleged unfair treatment remained. On 15 July 1962, a Minister taking a Sunday service in the prison, convinced that Sairusi was on the mend, asked him to lead the prisoners in prayer. Grabbing the opportunity, Sairusi ‘gave a vehement plea to the Almighty to deliver the Fijians from European bondage.’ From then on, there were no more sermons for Sairusi. A letter he wrote to the Visiting Justice of Prison on 17 May 1965 indicates that revenge was very much on Sairusi’s mind:

A prisoner will never forget the person who began the whole procedure that brought his disgrace and captivity. And that person in most cases is the policeman. In his heart, the prisoner shall be nursing his hatred while at the same time he is thinking of ways and means for revenge. He will be hoping some day, somehow, somewhere, he will have a chance to give the policeman what he deserves.

Mercifully, Sairusi was never again given that chance. Soon after writing the letter, Sairusi was examined by the government psychiatrist, Dr D.F. MacGregor.
Was Sairusi mad, delusional? No, Dr MacGregor concluded. Instead of suffering from mental or nervous illness, Sairusi believed ‘himself to be a righteous man pursuing righteous causes and that he is for these reasons above the law.’ He ‘regards the law of this land as something imposed by arbitrary action upon a reluctant people and does not regard it as binding upon him.’ Sairusi, MacGregor said, was no ordinary man. On the contrary, he found him to be ‘sane, highly intelligent, forceful, charming, ruthless and utterly without regard for the law or for the rights of others if these conflict with his own wishes.’ Dr. Macgregor continued: ‘There is a field of human abnormality in which a person is not quite like others and yet suffers from no actual disease of mind; he might be regarded as falling within this category but medical science is powerless to influence such people and I have no medical recommendations to make.’ Sairusi recalled Macgregor telling him that if he, Sairusi, did not end up in St. Giles, he would end up as president of Fiji one day. ‘Interesting, isn’t it,’ he laughed.

Sairusi occupied his restless mind with other things. While in the Suva Gaol, he wrote a novel, *Tawa Cava* (Immortal) set during World War Two. Those who read it saw in the novel Sairusi’s ‘deep pride in his own race and considerable anti-government and anti-European feeling.’ In 1967, Sairusi entered a short story under the nom de plume ‘Viti Viti Kabasi’ to the Fiji Arts Council Literary Award, and won the second prize. The nom de plume, Sairusi said, meant ‘the sound of the snapping twig is like a compass which points one as to which direction the object of the noise is.’ He received visitors—Meli Baleilakeba, GO Parr, and Sir Maurice Scott—and kept abreast of political developments outside the prison walls. He told a police constable early in 1968 that the Alliance Party under Ratu Mara (as he then was) had let Fijians down. Some in the Federation Party tried to entice him to their fold, but Sairusi would have no truck with them either, unlike Apisai Tora—with whom Sairusi had fallen out at the end—who had joined an ‘Indian’ political party he had once pilloried.

Released from prison in 1969 under a compulsory supervision order, Sairusi Nabogibogi returned to his father’s village Nayavutoka in Ra. He contested the 1972 general elections on a nationalist platform (anticipating Sakeasi Butadroka’s ideas by several years), for the Ba-East-Ra seat, but lost, winning only 1300 votes of some 9500 votes cast. In 1977, he stood for the Ra-Samabula-Suva Fijian communal constituency for his party, the Fijian Conservative Party, but was equally unsuccessful, collecting only 1862 of the 7540 of the Fijian votes cast. Sairusi was concerned about the future of his people. ‘In 100 years there may not be any full-blooded Fijians left,’ he said, ‘I hope my chiefs are worrying about the same thing too and do something about it. I hope they do, from the bottom of my heart.’ Racial miscegenation was a real worry to him. He wanted Fijian chiefs
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to forbid ‘Fijians marrying other races,’ stop them dressing like the other races. ‘The more we inter-marry, the quicker we are gone,’ he said. And lack of Fijian economic progress caused pain as well. ‘I am ashamed when I come to Suva. It does not belong to the Fijians. Does anything belong to the Fijians in the city? Does any business house belong to any Fijian? I walk in the streets here and I bend my head down. I am ashamed that I have nothing in this town.’ Sairusi spoke words which many Fijians would have recognised, expressing a sentiment many would have shared.

Aside from politics, Sairusi focussed his energy on establishing a communitarian self-help movement—the Messiah Movement—at Salemi, Nakorotubu in coastal Ra. Sairusi himself was the Messiah, the King. Salemi from Jerusalem. His own separate compound was called ‘Salaam,’ the Arabic word for peace. Accounts vary about what the Movement stood for, but it was broadly akin to the kibbutz: all for one and one for all, share and care altogether. It sought to instil discipline and a strict work ethic among the youth (Cauravou ni Salemi). Labour was strictly supervised, responsibilities carefully apportioned, a planned program of daily routine observed, people held accountable for the performance of their duties. Classes were held and attended by young and old. English was taught, but Fijian culture and tradition received special emphasis, because, Sairusi believed, they were in danger of being lost, corrupted by alien influences. The individual work ethic, with all that it entailed, was not for him or his people. Indeed, everything done at Salemi was done within the framework of Fijian culture, or a particular version of it, under Sairusi’s presiding genius. He had many followers across the country who were enticed by his vision for a pristine pastoral community, hypnotised by his charismatic personality. Sairusi’s hold on his followers was such that they refused to believe that he had died. They kept his body erect against the wall for several days before they finally buried him. Some still believe, to this day, that he will return as their messiah.

It is tempting to view Sairusi Nabogibogi as a maverick, an odd ball, albeit a dangerous one. He was probably that, and more—and less. Sairusi was no saint. That he himself would admit. He was a complex, conflicted character. Viewed historically, he belongs to a long list of dissident Fijians swimming against the currents of their time and the tenets of their own society. His deeds and thoughts bring to mind the name of Apolosi Nawai at the turn of the 20th century, a strong-willed person convinced of his own righteousness and manifest destiny, railing against a world he was convinced was out to get him, and determined to set things right by his own light. The fire he tried to light flickered for a while. Now it is part of a past vanishing beyond recall.
Tomasi Rayalu Vakatora

I received the news of Mr Tomasi Vakatora’s passing away on Tuesday evening in Lautoka while on a lecturing assignment there. It saddened me immensely. Tom—as he insisted on being called—was a wise and trusted friend and my ‘partner-in-crime’ on the Reeves Commission. In his passing, Fiji has lost one of its truly illustrious sons.

Tom Vakatora was no ordinary Fijian. He was a distinguished member of that greatest generation of Fijian civil servants ever to have worked for Fiji. Coming of age in the post-war era, they played an invaluable role in effecting Fiji’s smooth transition from colony to independence.

Their names are legion: Semesa Sikivou, Josefata and Esiteri Kamikamica, Filipe Bole and Taufa Vakatale, Savenaca and Suliana Siwatibau, Mosese Qionibaravi, Isireli Lasaqa, Rusiate Nayacakalou. The list is long, and I apologise for omissions.

Tom Vakatora’s range of accomplishments was awe-inspiring. He was born on 18 September 1926 at Naivalaca, Noco in Rewa, and educated the Noco District School, Suva Methodist Boy’s School, Lelean Memorial School, Nasinu Teachers Training College and briefly at Ruskin College, Oxford and the London School of Economics. With more encouragement and support from officialdom, he could have gone on to complete his university degree. He regretted the missed opportunity.

He began his career as a primary school teacher in 1948, resigning to join the Labour Department in 1955. There he rose rapidly, reaching the rank of Permanent Secretary and Commissioner of Labour in 1969, one of the very few locals to attain such distinction then. He retired from the civil service as Permanent Secretary of Works and Tourism in 1974.

A brief stint in the Senate was followed by his election to the House of Representatives in April 1976. There over the years, he served in a range of ministries before being appointed Speaker of the House from 1982-1987. After the coups, he served in Ratu Mara’s interim administration, becoming Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Economic Development in 1992.

Tom’s cv would be the envy of almost everyone, but his greatest achievement was yet to come—as member of the three-person Fiji Constitution Review Commission headed by Sir Paul Reeves. For his enormous contribution to that mammoth task, his place is secure in the history books.

I first met Tom Vakatora in March 1995 at the VIP House at Berkeley Crescent, on our way to being sworn in as commissioners at the Government House. He was formal and forbidding, as I had been warned he might be. A man of explosive temper, people had said, hard to get along with. ‘Mr Vakatora,’ I said as I extended my arm for a handshake. ‘Tom,’ he said firmly.
The next day, after the first formal and largely friendly session of the Commission’s proceedings, I said to Tom sitting across the table: ‘Well, Tom, there is no blood on the floor.’ ‘Not yet,’ he replied with a straight face. My goodness me, I said to myself, what have I let myself into. When I mentioned this episode to him many months later, he laughed and said that was his way of assessing me, testing my strength.

Tom’s vast experience assisted the Commission’s early planning work. He insisted, and we all readily agreed, that we disregard the advice of many political leaders that the Commission should not hold wide-ranging consultations throughout the country but peruse submissions made to previous commissions and make recommendations on that basis. We were proved right. The public consultations provided a great forum for soul searching national dialogue on the political future of the country.

As we travelled and talked, both Tom and I realized that there were more things that united the different and diverse communities of Fiji than those which divided them. Make no mistake: he was a very proud Fijian, unmistakably, unapologetically so; but he also realized that the destinies of our people were inseparably intertwined. He wanted to find a solution to our political difficulties that would address the concerns of all communities.

We were lucky in having Sir Paul Reeves as our chairman. A graceful, generous man, he said to Tom and me that if we came up with a united position on any issue, he would not stand in our way. He encouraged us to talk among ourselves. We did. Tom treated with complete respect even though I was much younger than him. He had a huge respect for protocol and the rules of engagement.

One long weekend, Tom and I spent long hours at The Fijian exploring together the fears, interests and aspirations of the communities we represented on the Commission. Out of that prolonged, sometimes tense (but never acrimonious) discussion emerged a consensus, committed to paper, which laid the foundation for our future thinking on the most important issues we had to resolve. The only thing Tom regretted about that weekend was that I did not play golf. But I was forgiven, because I was his friend.

Some Fijian leaders said harsh, hurtful things about Tom after the Commission had finished its work, that he somehow, somewhere, sold out the Fijian people, that he was asleep on the job, clueless. But Tom was unfazed, convinced in his soul that he had done the right thing. His conscience was clear. His, and the Commission’s, vision stands vindicated. His critics now acknowledge their error of judgment.

Tom was a strong man, but a large part of his inner strength came from two things he cherished most in his life: his family and his faith. He was a loving
father and an indulgent grandfather. And he could not have found a more companionable and supportive partner than Wai. Despite all his achievements, Tom never forgot his roots, nor his near and distant relatives whom he visited in Noco whenever he could. He was a large, enduring presence in their lives.

I have many memories of Tom: happy on good red, celebrating Diwali at our home in Canberra; of him teaching my then tiny son how to tie a fish hook and then watching him fish from the banks of Lake Burly Griffin; of the thigh-slapping stories he told with his impish sense of humour, of introducing me to the cultural complexities of his people, of fondly introducing Padma to a group from his village as ‘vuniwai ni tiri tiri,’ because her dissertation was on Fiji mangroves, of him and Filipe Bole, fuelled by ample amber liquid, singing Fijian songs late into the night at his home.

But my most enduring memory is of the day before we submitted our report when he skippered a boat to the Nasilai Reef, with Wai, Padma and me in it, to the place where the Syria was wrecked in 1884, causing the death of 59 girmitiyas. He asked a man from his village who had joined us to retrieve two pieces from the rusting wreckage. He gave me one and kept the other for himself. ‘My people saved your people then,’ he said. ‘Now, you and I can save all our people together.’ A wonderful but daunting sentiment.

To that endeavour of saving his deeply divided nation, he made a distinguished contribution. And for that, he will be honoured for as long as people remember.

Mr Bechu Prasad
Mr Bechu Prasad’s death has touched the nation. There is universal sadness that he is no longer with us. Babuji, as he was known affectionately, touched our hearts not only because he was the oldest living person in Fiji. That was certainly a part of the reason for the huge popularity he enjoyed in all our communities.

But he had other qualities that caused admiration. He was a true son of the soil. He was a dedicated farmer, and a man of immense discipline. Farming was for him a way of life of which he was proud. He belonged to that generation of farmers who looked to Mother Earth not only for what it could give them, but what they could back in return. Babuji was a model farmer who could well serve as an inspiration for our and future generation. The sad irony, he once said, was that while he liked farming, the younger generation did not like farm work.

Babuji never gave up. In 1984, Cyclone Eric destroyed his home, his prized possessions scattered around the village. But instead of feeling sorry for himself, Babuji helped government officials distribute ration and other assistance to the people. His concern always was for his fellow human beings.
His love for Sabeto was well known. But beyond that was his enduring love for Fiji. Once a young reporter asked him about Fiji. This is what he said: ‘This is my mother country. The same place you live in, the same place I live in. You must think about that. My mother and father came to this country. They work hard here. Where can we go? Tell me. We must stay here and die here. No other place. That’s the important part. We must remember that.’ In his passionate, unquestioning love for the land of his birth, Babuji could also act as an inspiration for the younger generation.

Babuji lived a long and bountiful life. He was born during the girmit era. His parents were indentured labourers. At small age, he witnessed their suffering, their hardship at first hand. Then, as a young man, he saw his people pick up the pieces and start life as independent farmers on small plots of land. He lived through the era of the CSR and Colonial Rule. He saw Fiji become independent. And he saw us falter. But his faith in this country and all its people did not diminish. He believed right to the end that with enough goodwill, we could overcome the adversities we face and make this land of ours a paradise for all. In this respect, too, he taught us a lesson.

Babuji was proud of his heritage. But he was not blinded by it. His circle of friends extended across our multiethnic communities. He regarded Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna as a father figure, a great model for leaders. Ratu Sir Lala visited him often whenever he was in the west. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara listened respectfully to his views about the problems of the farming community. In fact, he was only one of two men in the Indo-Fijian community—the other was Swami Rudrananda—who could ‘lecture’ to the Prime Minister without giving offense. Such was the affection and trust he inspired in people. Only Babuji could tell Prince Charles to his face that when he sat down in his house, there should be no talk of politics!

Babuji was a man of the people. He gave selflessly to all who needed his help. He was president and manager of Sabeto Indian School for 70 years. He served as Lautoka Indian Advisory Council chairman from 1937 to the late 1990s. He was a member of the Liquor Board and Indian Advisor to the Native Land Trust Board. He served as a member of the Nadi Hospital Board and as Cane Growers Councillor for the Natova Sector in the first Council elected in 1985. The list is extensive and impressive.

It is no wonder that Babuji received many awards and honours for his community service: The Coronation Medal (1953), the Justice of the Peace Medal in 1956, Certificate of Honour in 1959, the Independence Medal in 1970, the MBE in 1973 and the 25th Anniversary of Independence Medal in 1996. He appreciated these awards, but they did not affect his work or inflate his ego. He continued to work for the greater good of the community.
Prejudice and narrow-mindedness were alien to his nature. That is why our people feel that they have lost someone near and dear, a family member. But as we mourn Babuji’s passing away, we also celebrate his long and distinguished innings, his passionate love for Fiji, his deep faith in his fellow human beings, his life of service. Babuji, we salute you and are proud of you.

Sir Paul Reeves and Fiji

Two weeks before he died, Sir Paul Reeves wrote to me to say that he had cancer and might not be able to overcome it. But characteristically he did not dwell on his ailment. Instead, he talked about Fiji. ‘Our work in Fiji was among the most satisfying that I have done, and sometime it will have its day.’ He concluded: ‘I have dear memories of you, Tom and myself, an incongruous team that did great things.’

Sir Paul had good reason to be proud of his Fiji work. He was called upon to help Fiji in its moment of great need, and he rose to the challenge as few others could have done. The post-1987 years were the most fraught in Fiji’s modern history. The military coup of that year had ruptured race relations, torn up the constitution, severed the cherished links with the British Crown, and plunged the country into an abyss of darkness. The two major communities, Fijians and Indo-Fijians, had diametrically opposed views about the country’s problems and the best way to resolve them. Fijian nationalists were adamant in their demand for complete political paramountcy and the Indo-Fijians insistent on genuine political partnership.

Into this tense and seemingly irreconcilable situation entered Sir Paul Reeves as Chair of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission. The task of the Commission was to review the racially-lopsided 1990 constitution and to make recommendations for a new one which, to use the language of the Terms of Reference, took ‘into account internationally recognized principles and standards of individual and group rights, guarantee full protection and promotion of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman people, and have full regard for the rights, interests and concerns of all ethnic groups in Fiji.’ In other words, square the circle.

No one really gave the Commission any chance of success. There was a great deal of scepticism about Sitiveni Rabuka’s motives. Would a person who had carried out the coup really change the constitution to accommodate the interests of other communities? Hardly likely, most people thought. The review, many felt, was a ruse to keep the international community at bay while the coup supporters entrenched their position in the country. And the Fijian nationalists, led by Inoke Kukuabola, Apisai Tora, Taniela Veitata, and others, demanded the full retention of the 1990 Constitution.
Sir Paul knew the tough task that awaited him in Fiji. He made one early decision that had a huge impact on the work of the Commission. He hired Alison Quentin-Baxter as its chief legal counsel (ably assisted by Jon Apted). Alison was the complete professional of unimpeachable integrity and an enviable tenacity of purpose. Nothing escaped her notice. She left no stone unturned. She kept the Commission on an even keel, educating us on arcane matters of international law and conventions, alerting us to alternatives. Alison has not received the kudos that she so richly deserves.

Sir Paul met the rest of the ‘incongruous team’ in Fiji. He was understandably concerned to establish early rapport between the three Commissioners. The task was not easy. Tom Vakatora was the Government’s nominee, a tough, formidable man of explosive temper. He had been a part of the Cabinet Sub-Committee which had approved the 1990 Constitution, the very document we were supposed to review. His presence on the Commission simply reinforced among Coalition supporters the sense the review would be nothing but a charade. The early days were difficult, but in time, Tom proved to be a character completely different to his public persona: warm, companionable and extremely hard working. Beneath a gruff exterior beat a kindly heart. He became my lifelong friend.

I was the Coalition’s nominee. I did not know of Sir Paul I am ashamed to admit, even though I had his daughter Jane in my class at the University of Hawaii. But I established early rapport with him. My first impression of Sir Paul was that he was a warm human being, a man of grace who did not stand on protocol as some other local dignitaries did, always reaching out. There was little paper trail behind him so I did not know where he stood on some of the critical issues we were asked to consider. I therefore kept an open mind and my powder dry, just in case.

Early on in the piece, Sir Paul said to Tom and myself, ‘If you two reach consensus, I will not stand in your way.’ He encouraged the two of us to talk among ourselves, to break down barriers and to establish trust. This we did, to great effect, I would like to think. It was during a one-on-one meeting between Tom and myself at The Fijian one long weekend, that we reached provisional consensus on some difficult issues, as the papers of the Commission will one day show. The credit belongs to Sir Paul for having confidence in himself to allow the two of us talk and explore consensus.

Then there was Sir Paul himself. He was a man of grace and gravitas—a former Anglican Archbishop of New Zealand and its Governor General, a man proud of his indigenous Maori heritage but not imprisoned by it, a man of deep spirituality and integrity, of solid convictions but always willing to listen carefully to contrary points of view. He easily put people at ease with his humour.
and infectious laughter. He was the ideal ambassador for the Commission. He won the confidence and trust of the major political leaders who were so recently at loggerheads. They saw him accurately as a man of peace, a fair mediator. That was no mean achievement in the circumstances.

The work of the Commission was a collective effort, so it would be invidious to isolate the input of the individual Commissioners. Opinions will vary and recollections will differ. Sir Paul’s principal contribution lay in moderating discussion and in playing the role of the fair cop and in giving us the space to be ourselves. For me, Sir Paul’s unique interventions lay in two areas. One was the relationship between Church and State. Methodist Church was adamant that Fiji should be declared a Christian State. Christianity was an integral part of indigenous Fijian identity, and recognizing the special role of the church was a part of the larger agenda of entrenching the principle of Fijian paramountcy. Very often, the demand was backed up by some obscure passage from the Bible. This was completely foreign to me and frequently left me nonplussed. But not Sir Paul. He could with ease recall some appropriate chapter and verse from the Bible to diffuse the issue or contradict it outright! This left some of the submitters perplexed, this deep knowledge of the scriptures on his part. Isn’t it better to be a good Christian than to insist on a Christian State, he would ask? I remember one person saying to me, ‘The falla too good, eh. He a talatala [preacher] or what?’

The other area in which I watched Sir Paul’s intervention with great interest was on the question of indigenous rights. Many an indigenous presenter tried to make out that Fijians were like oppressed indigenous communities elsewhere in the world, including New Zealand. That did not wash with Sir Paul although he listened respectfully to their views. Where Fijian interests and institutions needed to be protected, they should be, was Sir Paul’s view. One provision of the Compact says that ‘To the extent that the interests of different communities are seen to conflict, all the interested parties should enter into negotiations in good faith in an endeavour to reach agreement.’ In that effort, ‘the paramountcy of Fijian interests as a protective principle should continue to apply, so as to ensure that the interests of the Fijian community are not subordinated to the interests of other communities.’ That was a sensible position to adopt. To those who invoked various international conventions on the protection of indigenous rights, the Commission took the view that these instruments were designed to ensure the full participation of the indigenous communities in the management and governance of their societies, not enshrining the principle of paramountcy. Sir Paul’s experience as the Anglican Observer at the United Nations came in handy.
One aspect of the 1997 Constitution that has received much criticism is its racially-based electoral system. In this regard, the Constitution is completely at variance with the recommendations of the Reeves Commission. The Commission recommended that Fiji move away gradually but decisively from a racial electoral system to a non-racial one. To that end, it recommended that two thirds of the seats in Parliament (46) be elected from open, non-racial rolls and one third (25) from racially reserved rolls (but only for a short period as a transitional measure). The Parliament reversed the order at the insistence of the SVT, especially its hardline representative on the Parliamentary Select Committee, Inoke Kubuabola, who wanted the full retention of the 1990 Constitution and would not budge an inch. Now Kubuabola is presenting himself as the champion of non-racialism. Such are the processes of personal transformations in contemporary Fiji.

There were other recommendations designed to heal the wounds of the past and to unite the nation. The Senate should be elected from the provinces, not nominated by political leaders, so that it could act as a true house of review of the people and in the process encourage loyalty to one’s province of origin rather than to one’s ethnicity. The President and the Vice President should be elected by a joint sitting of the two houses of parliament as an Electoral College for the purpose. In the allocation of public resources, the principle of need rather than ethnicity should be observed along with the principle of proportionality. I know that Sir Paul was very proud of the human rights provisions of the report.

As I have said, no one gave the Commission much chance of success when we began our work, but by the time we finished, we had managed to re-start a remarkable national conversation about reconciliation and nation-building. In this effort, Sir Paul’s role was crucial. He had earned everyone’s trust and confidence, and that made the Commission’s work all that much easier. The healing process that began with the Commission’s work was continued, and resulted in the promulgation of the much-praised 1997 Constitution.

In the covering letter to the President, Sir Paul personally inserted a few sentences that spoke to the way in which he envisaged the task of nation building. The report, he said, ‘stresses that the unity of this nation is a continuous process of discovery and enrichment.’ A continuous, not a fossilized, process admitting of change and adaptation. He said that progress in a multi-ethnic society is achieved ‘when citizens realise that what is good for their neighbour must ultimately be good for them as well.’ Finally, he hoped that the Commission’s report ‘will be the touchstone against which the people will measure progress towards a strong and united future for themselves and for generations to come.’

That hope now seems forlorn, but who knows? Someday perhaps, Sir Paul’s vision of Fiji as a vibrant multi-ethnic nation, united by a common purpose and
a shared sense of collective destiny, confident about the future and at peace with itself might ‘have its day.’

Sir Paul Reeves will occupy an honoured place in the galaxy of leaders who have had a hand in shaping Fiji’s destiny. He will not be forgotten. Moce Maca, Sir, Fare Well.