

# Chapter 13

## Telling the Life of A.D. Patel

Brij V. Lal

Ambalal Dahyabhai Patel, or 'AD', as he was universally known, was the greatest leader of the Indo-Fijian community in colonial Fiji and, arguably, one of the country's most brilliant public intellectuals. Steeped in the Gandhian tradition of politics, at whose dawn he came of age, possessing astute political skills, widely read and far-sighted, at home in several languages, the most outstanding criminal lawyer of his day, he strode the public stage like none other. Often at the centre of the most momentous events in Fiji's post-war history, he was nevertheless unable, in his own lifetime, to realise the vision of a non-racial political culture based on the principle of the common roll. Born in Gujarat in 1905, Patel came to Fiji in 1928 and died there in 1969, a year before the colony became independent.

The most ardent advocate of Fiji's independence is now a forgotten figure in Fiji, remembered, if remembered at all, in a few primary and secondary schools which bear his name and among the fading generation of National Federation Party supporters, the party he founded in 1963. On the other hand, Patel's counterpart among Fijians, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, is honoured in public memorials and a national holiday named after him, his legacy of chiefly leadership commemorated in an authorised biography.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, Sukuna has become somewhat of a national public icon while the public knowledge of Patel's enormous contribution to the political life of his adopted country, and the inclusive non-racial vision he espoused all his life, has receded, a result, no doubt, of a deliberate policy of manicuring reputations and accentuating things Fijian in the broader scheme of things. However great or worthy a non-Fijian, it is unlikely that he or she will be allowed to compete for national limelight with the stars of the Fijian establishment.<sup>2</sup> Fiji's icons will always remain Fijian.

In 1997, after a decade of interrupted research, I published my biography of A.D. Patel, *A Vision for Change: A.D. Patel and the politics of Fiji*.<sup>3</sup> I reflect here on how I came to write the biography, the sources I used and how these helped or hindered my research effort. Ten years on, new sources of information, principally the Colonial Office records at the Public Record Office (PRO) in Kew Gardens, have become available on the most crucial decade of Fiji's political evolution—the 1960s—in which Patel had a major role to play.<sup>4</sup> Does the new

archival material require revision of the conclusions I reached in the book? Does it fundamentally alter the terms of the debate about Fiji's decolonisation? These and related questions form the substance of this chapter.

I do not quite know when I first heard A.D. Patel's name. There was our neighbour, Mr Ram Dayal Singh, an illiterate but wealthy cane farmer and bus-owner, whom we grew up calling Patel. He was nicknamed after A.D., apparently for his ingenious, irrefutable arguments in village meetings to sway decisions in his favour, as A.D. Patel, the canny criminal lawyer, did in the court room. But this connection came to me much later. I must have heard Patel's name during the 1959 strike, prolonged and devastating, causing a shortage of sugar at home and often making us go without it. Patel was the leader of the strike. His name, mentioned in disapproving tones on the radio which had just arrived in our settlement, was at the outer edges of our political consciousness during the 1960s as Fiji hurtled towards independence. Labasa was a rural, isolated backwater then, and politics was never discussed at school except perfunctorily and surreptitiously among teachers and then, too, away from the earshot of students.

It was at university that I first became aware of Patel's role in Fiji's public life. I soon discovered that most official records and recollections, oral and written, either deified or demonised him; frequently the latter among the urban elite who sought to shore up not shake the colonial establishment. The *Fiji Times*, the only local daily then, portrayed Patel always as a dangerous man bent on wreaking havoc on the country to gain political power at any cost. I realised the full range and scope of Patel's contribution after I had finished my postgraduate studies at The Australian National University, published my dissertation, and, getting interested in the more recent history of Fiji, was on the lookout for a new topic. It was then that A.D. Patel's life suggested itself. Existing references to Patel's ambition and his dubious commitment to Fiji simply whetted my appetite.<sup>5</sup> There was, on reflection, another reason for my interest in the man. Soon after returning to Fiji, I began to take scholarly interest in contemporary national politics.<sup>6</sup> The National Federation Party was tearing itself apart over leadership in the 1970s. As I sought to understand why, I got more and more interested in its early history and, as an extension, in the charismatic leadership of its founder. By the 1970s, Patel had become, in the eyes of his supporters, a mythic figure, similar in influence and stature to Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna.

Having resolved to work on Patel, I wrote to his widow, Leela, expressing my wish and seeking her permission to consult Patel's papers (if they existed). The reply never came: people in Fiji do not generally write letters, but permission was generously given when I began the project and approached the family in person. The family cooperated fully, but not once did they ask to see the manuscript when it was completed or seek to know about my lines of enquiry.

I was welcomed with open arms and allowed to consult whatever papers I wanted, including Patel's private letters and his diary, his official correspondence.<sup>7</sup> His children, especially Patel's two daughters, Pratibha and Vasantika, placed at my disposal letters their father wrote, and Leela answered questions about the family scene: the long car rides, the Sunday picnics, the late night games of bridge, the music and singing, the personal quirks of her late husband, his occasional absent-mindedness as he became absorbed in preparing for important court cases, his incessant appetite for reading. In these conversations, Patel came through as a warm, caring father to whom the happiness of his family was paramount. But the timing was wrong. Soon after writing to Leela, I left Suva for Honolulu where I turned my attention to other topics, the coups of 1987 and the modern history of Fiji. For a while Patel faded from my research radar. A heavy teaching load took its own toll on my time and energy. But upon returning to Australia in 1990, and with books on the coup and 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Fiji written, I returned to Patel, now with purpose and determination to finish a project I had first contemplated a decade ago.<sup>8</sup>

In Canberra, I was fortunate to have two major sources which were to prove highly relevant to my research. One was the Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company archives at the Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour. Patel had been at the centre stage of the sugar industry disputes in 1943 and 1960, and the key advocate for the cane growers before the Denning Arbitration in 1969. His role in the disputes was the cause of much controversy, some of it continuing to this day.<sup>9</sup> The CSR papers, I hoped, would enable a deeper probing of a controversial subject, which they did but not to the degree I had expected. They were useful in providing an insight into the CSR view of things and how the company sought to influence people and events to its advantage. But apart from the strike papers, I did not find much of direct value to me. The bulk of the archival material deals with the day-to-day operations of the company, correspondence between various mills in Fiji and the CSR headquarters in Sydney. Like the Patel family, the CSR, too, gave me unconditional access to its papers and placed no restriction on what I might or might not see. Clearly, as far as the company was concerned, its days in Fiji were a part of a receding history. It could be magnanimous because for it, the past was truly past.

The other major source in Canberra was the complete set of the weekly journal *Pacific Review* which Patel started in 1949. In its early years, the *Review* was remarkably liberal and informative, bringing to Fiji news from around the world that was critical of imperial and colonial practices, news which the *Fiji Times* would never publish. The weekly died with Patel. Past employees and correspondents of the *Pacific Review* had told me that in the 1950s, when Patel was out of active politics and to a lesser extent in the 1960s, when he was the centre of it, he wrote most of the editorials. The *Pacific Review* proved

indispensable for my research, providing me access to material, sometimes confidential, that I could not find in the archives. *Pacific Review's* Hindi counterpart, *Jagriti*, was less informative but important in gauging the pulse of the Indo-Fijian farming community. Both these newspapers were effective counterweights to the *Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Broadcasting Commission*. In 1989 and 1990, I wrote to several former colonial officials who knew Patel and worked closely with him, especially when he was Member of Social Services between 1964 and 1967. I also wrote to former governor Sir Kenneth Maddocks and Lord Denning, whose responses are discussed later on.<sup>10</sup>

By the time I went to Fiji in 1992, I had gathered much material of direct relevance to the project. In Fiji, I was keen to pursue three sources. The first was archival. Much of the material before 1947 I had already seen when researching my *Broken Waves*. Unfortunately for the 1960s, the critical period in Fiji's transition to independence, the files were not available under the 30-year rule. They were available now, but were not of much value. The substance of the most important policy papers was already available in the newspapers or in private collections. I was told by a very senior colonial official about five years ago that much of the sensitive, personal material about prominent leaders had actually been destroyed just before independence, apparently a fairly standard practice at the close of colonial rule. Besides unpublished files, I systematically read all the *Hansard* for the years Patel was a member of the Legislative Council (1944-1950 and 1963-1969) to gauge his views on controversial public issues of the day. The second mission I had to accomplish in Fiji was to consult Patel's private papers, and the third was to interview people who knew Patel or were in some way associated with him.

By 1994, I began writing the book, and by 1995 had managed to produce a substantial draft. But I was then called to serve on the Fiji Constitution Commission from 1995-1996. The disruption was prolonged and intense. Nevertheless, I used whatever free time I had to write and revise chapters. In one important sense, the timing was fortuitous. Writing and reflecting on Patel's life, often deep into the night, kept the forgotten struggle for a just and fair constitution for Fiji and all its people at the forefront of my mind. I was acutely aware of the missteps and failures of past efforts and keen to move beyond Fiji's constitutional cul-de-sac. An awareness of the past weighed heavily on my mind during these two critical years when we ourselves were charting a new course for Fiji. I had written in my *Broken Waves* that Fiji's modern history was a history of missed opportunities, and I hoped very much that our work would not take that route.

I will not revisit the central arguments of the biography here. The reception has been warm, both in published reviews as well as in private correspondence. I particularly cherish a private, unsolicited, letter from Peter France, sometime

Secretary for Fijian Affairs and the author of the great *Charter of the Land: custom and colonisation in Fiji*. He wrote on 19 March 1998: '[Y]our book made me feel at the same time a regret that I had not got to know AD better and a satisfaction that I had been able to live, for a time, inside his head. You demonstrate superbly that AD often spoke and acted, from a position not only of intellectual, but of moral superiority. This was emphatically not widely recognised during his lifetime and we are all in your debt for pointing it out'. But privately, some individuals, usually former politicians bitterly opposed to Patel but who had now joined the National Federation Party after leaving the Alliance Party for a variety of reasons, wrote to me to say that I had grossly exaggerated Patel's role, elevated him to the level of statesman when he was nothing more than a common garden variety politician, a grasping Gujarati feeding off the ignorance of cane growers whose case he claimed to champion. But negative responses were few. Some pointed out, gleefully or helpfully, minor errors which will be corrected in any future edition.

This leads me to the value of private correspondence for my research. Most of these were from British colonial officials who had served in Fiji on lengthy tours of duty, most of them in departments directly dealing with the Fijians. They elucidated points, clarified doubts and suggested other contacts or lines of enquiry. Their value is immeasurable, not least because they provided a counterweight to the Patel papers. I shall illustrate this with a small sample of responses I received. The first is from Sir Kenneth Maddocks, governor of Fiji between 1958 and 1964, a critical time for the colony, coinciding with the industrial disturbance in Suva in 1959 and a strike in the sugar industry in 1960 and the first official move, after nearly 30 years, towards constitutional change preparing the way for greater internal self-government. Patel was pilloried in the press and by his critics for his vaulting ambition, his heartless attitude to the suffering of the cane growers he was representing. The *Fiji Times* wrote about Patel and his followers as 'cowards who hide in cane fields to destroy by fire the fruits of other men's labour ... self-seeking, politically ambitious, emotionally twisted grabbers of power by lies and intimidation'.<sup>11</sup>

Maddocks, who had come to Fiji from Tanganyika where he had been governor, saw Patel as a 'very capable, quick-witted and experienced advocate, determined to press his case forcefully and inflexibly'. The strike had antagonised some Fijian cane growers, caused violence and necessitated the declaration of emergency in the sugar belts of Fiji to protect farmers who wanted to harvest or, in effect, break the strike. All that was on the debit side. 'On the other hand', Maddocks continued, 'there is no doubt that he had a case'. But this is *not* what the governor said at the time or in his correspondence with London. Throughout the '60s, everyone denied that Patel had a case. For its part, the CSR viewed cane growers as a lazy, profligate lot whose sorry fate was entirely their own doing.

The strike was broken, and a commission of enquiry under Sir Malcolm Trustram Eve instituted. The Eve report criticised Patel as an intelligent but misguided man who could, if he wanted to, provide leadership of the 'right kind'. Eve accused Patel and his colleagues of causing disruption in the sugar industry 'in the hope of gaining advantages for themselves and of trying to drive the millers out of Fiji'. The sugar industry had become a vehicle for 'ambitious politicians'.<sup>12</sup> Ambitious politicians: these are almost exactly the same words used to describe the strike leaders in 1943. Privately, Eve respected Patel's integrity, according to Robert Sanders, a senior colonial civil servant who served as Secretary to Cabinet for many years after Fiji became independent and who ghosted Ratu Mara's memoirs. Whatever the differences between himself and Patel, Eve said to Sanders, 'one loyalty he was convinced Mr Patel had was his loyalty to his Inn [Middle Temple]' and 'whatever other misgivings he might have he could rely on this'. Patel's opponents seized on Eve's public condemnation in his report to excoriate him. But in truth, as Patel had divined, the contract based on the Eve report broke many farmers and sent them into bankruptcy. Vijay R. Singh, who had led the anti-Patel faction during the strike, later called Patel the greatest leader the growers had ever had, as did N. S. Chalmers of the rival cane growers' group. Interestingly, when Patel went to London for the 1965 conference, Eve, by then Lord Silsoe, invited Patel for tea at his house, the man he had condemned four years back.

After a decade of grief in the sugar cane growing community, when the Eve contract expired, Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls in the United Kingdom and a highly respected judge in the Commonwealth, was appointed to arbitrate a new contract.<sup>13</sup> The atmosphere was charged. In 1969, Fiji was just a year away from independence. The war was on for the vote for the Indo-Fijian community in the cane belts of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Ratu Mara, keen to bolster his image as a multiracial leader, and encouraged by the members of the Indian Alliance and the Alliance-oriented Kisan Sangh, courted the Indo-Fijian vote assiduously. At the arbitration, the Alliance was represented by the lead counsel Geoffrey Brennan QC, later the Chief Justice of Australia. The Federation of Cane Growers, affiliated to the NFP, was represented by A.D. Patel (and Karam Ramrakha and Siddiq Koya). In his report, Denning confirmed what Patel and others had been saying throughout the '60s about the Eve contract, that it was heavily biased towards the millers and prejudiced against the growers. '[U]nder the Eve formula', Denning wrote, 'the risk of loss is all on the growers. None at all on the millers: or, at any rate, none to speak of'. Denning regretted Patel's death during the course of the arbitration and praised his advocacy skills: 'He was an accomplished advocate who presented admirably to me the case of the Federation'. But the Alliance went out of its way to claim that Denning's pro-grower report was the result of its own representation before the arbitration.<sup>14</sup> It was a popular claim, effective in the 1972 election campaign

when the Alliance managed for the first—and the last—time nearly to win a quarter of the Indo-Fijian votes.

What was the truth? Did Patel's advocacy have any effect at all on the outcome of the arbitration? To find out, I wrote to Lord Denning himself, not really expecting a reply, not knowing whether the good Lord was still alive and active. To my great delight, I received a handwritten letter on House of Lord's stationery on 20 January 1990. 'I remember A.D. Patel well', Denning began. 'Of all the lawyers who appeared before me, A.D. Patel was outstanding. He even out-shone Mr Brennan (now of the High Court of Australia). He was a master of all the facts and particularly of the sugar industry in Fiji. He presented them with skill and understanding. It was his persuasive advocacy that led me to my report which was in favour of the growers and against the millers'. And what about Patel the man himself? 'A.D. Patel was intellectually the most brilliant, as a character the most honourable, and as an advocate, the most persuasive. Quick in mind, fluent in speech, he stood out above all.' But this fact came to light only in 1990, 20 years after Patel's opponents pilloried the man and downplayed his enormous contribution to the sugar industry in Fiji. Denning's priceless letter sets the record straight once and for all on a matter of great political moment in Indo-Fijian history: the beginning of the end of the CSR in Fiji. The value of such private correspondence cannot be overemphasised, nor the importance of luck. Parts of Denning's letter have been quoted in speeches in Fiji, but to no observable effect as far as I can tell.

Between 1964 and 1967, Patel was the Member for Social Services in the colonial government. Ratu Mara was the Member for Natural Resources and John Falvey the Member for Communication. The Membership System was an intermediate step toward full internal self-government later. About this period in Fiji's history, no outsider was a closer observer of events than Leonard Usher, then editor of the *Fiji Times*. Usher was an unapologetically, energetically, pro-establishment journalist whose assumed air of objectivity was insufficient camouflage for an intense dislike of Patel and his brand of politics. Acting Governor P.D. Macdonald wrote to London on 6 August 1965, criticising Usher who 'slyly hints at the unreasonableness of the attitude of the Federation group, and the rightness of the stand taken by the other groups; he stresses the difficulties and deadlocks at the conference, hinting that these are all the fault of the Federation group rather than encouraging the hope that statesmanship and compromise will prevail'.<sup>15</sup> The Fiji Intelligence Report for December 1965 reported of Usher having 'developed an almost pathological dislike of the Federation Party, and A.D. Patel in particular'. Trafford Smith, Assistant Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, had a different opinion: 'A charming man to meet, not the bogey-man the Fiji Times makes him out to be'.<sup>16</sup> I knew of Usher's political leanings and prejudices. The records in London confirmed them in unambiguous terms. But I do not know if the government, knowing the

facts about Usher's mischievous role in fanning the anti-Indian flame, ever cautioned him. Probably not, for the propaganda continued unabated.

The pages of the *Fiji Times* in the 1960s were full of anti-Federation invective. In an interview early in 1990, I asked Usher of his views on A.D. Patel. He praised Patel's intelligence and learning, his mastery of the English language, his rhetorical flourish (as virtually everyone I spoke did), but thought he was stubborn, uncompromising, politically ambitious for himself and his community and dangerous for Fiji. As Member of Social Services, Patel was a disaster, Usher said, because he did not take his responsibilities seriously, coming in late to the office, cursory with his administrative duties. The pattern was predictable. In Usher's mind, Patel was intent on wrecking the Membership System if only to vindicate the view that complete independence was the only answer to Fiji's problems. I asked Gordon Roger about this. Roger, a New Zealander like Usher, was a long-time Director of Education in Fiji, who had served directly under Patel in the mid-1960s. Roger had a completely different story to tell. According to him, Patel was an ideal mentor for senior civil servants. He differed from his successors in two main ways, Roger said. First, 'he had (or at least he gave the impression of having) no axe to grind. This meant he was able to look at educational ideas and problems in terms of *education*, not in terms of votes; and because we (his senior staff in the Edn Dept) had been brought up to do likewise there was in fact very little friction between us'. He goes on: 'I doubt whether we really appreciated at the time just what an easy introduction to the future ministerial system A.D. was in fact giving us'. There were differences between Patel and his staff in setting priorities, but Roger says that 'once we started looking at things through his eyes—he was a very persuasive teacher!—our generally negative attitude became much more positive'.

Roger gives an example of the way in which Patel 'handled' his staff. When he and his deputy Max Bay opposed an idea Patel had put up, he summoned the two to a morning tea-time meeting to explain their opposition to his proposal in person. 'It was the first time he'd used this ploy, and it proved very effective, because a hurriedly-convened staff meeting at 8am had shown me that the idea wasn't in fact nearly as impracticable as it had sounded 20 minutes earlier. When I subsequently told him how near I'd been to saying "no" again, he smiled engagingly and said, in the nicest possible way, "You know, Gordon, it's good for all of us to be made to think sometimes"'. Kenneth Bain, Patel's Permanent Secretary for Social Services, concurs. 'The circumstances of our coming together in this [the Membership System] were unusual and our relationship became one of considerable interest and, I believe, trust.' This, Bain, goes on to say, 'in spite of the fact that my wife stood for election to the Legislative Council as an Alliance-endorsed candidate'. In the circumstances, one must give preference to Roger's and Bain's version, based as it is on direct experience, over Usher's



based on hearsay and prejudiced evidence. The extent of harm to race relations and to political negotiations by Usher's jaundiced views is beyond measure.

A constant refrain throughout the 1960s was that Patel was anti-European, which Patel denounced as a 'wicked lie'. How could he be anti-European when his first wife was an English woman? When his young children were attending school in England? 'If A.D. was anti-European', Roger recalled, 'I do not recall his ever showing it in my presence. Personally, I doubt whether he was. But even if he were, why not? There were plenty of Europeans around at the time who made no secret of the fact that they were anti-Indian'. Ray Baker, District Officer in the Fiji in the 1960s, did not think European colonial officials were overtly or deliberately anti-Indian, but it was 'probably true to say that most expatriate administrators were at that time pro-Fijian in the sense that we felt in sympathy with their perception of themselves as the *taukei*—the owners of most of the land but economically backward and overtaken in population by immigrant races'. On this aspect none other than Governor Derek Jakeway was in complete agreement. He said on a visit to Australia in February 1965, just as preparations were under way for the constitutional conference in London in July, that 'it was inconceivable that Britain would ever permit the Fijian people to be placed politically under the heels of an immigrant community'. Jakeway got it wrong. In truth, the Indo-Fijian leaders did not want *any* community to be dominated; they wanted political equality, and equality of representation. Patel was not anti-European: he was certainly anti-colonial. In the minds of colonial officials the two were one and the same thing.

Those who relied solely on the reports and coverage in the *Fiji Times* would, unsurprisingly, form a decidedly unpopular impression of Patel and his followers. But A.C. Reid's private recollection suggests another view. Reid was the trusted Secretary of Fijian Affairs and member of the hugely influential Fijian Affairs Board. In 1949, Patel, then a member of the Executive Council, visited Labasa with Swami Rudrananda. Reid then was Commissioner Northern. The official team was invited to the opening of a new school at Tuatua, on the outskirts of the local township. As Reid was walking up from the main road with Patel and Swamiji, they 'were suddenly confronted by one of the guests—annoyed at the flying of the Sangam flag over the gathering. As I remember, the management was Sangam but the school would be expected, under the rules, to fly the Union Jack on official occasions. There was an embarrassing pause until, bearing in mind A.D.'s senior position in the government, I sought his assistance and he turned to the Swami. While I did not know the precise content of what was said, it was clear that A.D. was determined to adhere to the rules, notwithstanding the Swami's glum reaction. I may add that a very new-looking Union flag was brought out of the school and hoisted up the flagpole'. Patel was, first and foremost, a constitutionalist in the rather old-fashioned way, acutely aware of the need to respect certain protocols and conventions.

Private recollections of the type I have quoted above, mostly from people who, at the time, were on the opposite side to Patel, help to complicate a picture of a man reviled in his time. My conversations with people in Fiji provided further insights into how Patel approached politics. He was a born politician who kept his finger squarely on the pulse of the community, finding time to talk to ordinary people about their problems and concerns. Every Saturday, without exception, he would go to the Nadi market to do the family's vegetable shopping—less to buy things than to mingle with the people. Whenever he returned from Suva to his home in Nadi, he would stop his car and buy fruits and vegetables Fijians sold by the roadside. When his wife protested at his extravagance, he would say, 'When that boy returns to his village, he will tell his family and friends that he sold vegetables to Patela. That is free publicity for us'. Whenever Patel addressed rallies, especially in western Viti Levu, he would ask the local chairman of the party what was being said on the ground so that he could adjust his speech accordingly. In 1963, Siddiq Koya, a Muslim, stood for election in a predominantly Hindu constituency. His opponent was James Shankar Singh, from a large and powerful Arya Samaj clan in Ba. His supporters, so it was reported, were telling people to vote for Singh and not Koya. When Patel was told this, he began his speech by saying 'It is true that Mr Koya is a Musalman, but at least he has remained true to his faith'. He did not need to mention 'James' Shankar Singh's name to drive home the point about Singh's conversion to Christianity. Religion never again surfaced in the campaign. Stories like this abound in the fading memories of a passing older generation.

When I wrote the biography, I had seen all the records, both open and confidential, under the 30-year rule at the National Archives of Fiji. But I had not seen the enormous archives at the Public Record Office. These contain dispatches from the governor in Fiji, records of deliberations in Whitehall about the future directions of policy regarding Fiji's independence, conference proceedings, and petitions and letters from Fiji. Would I have written a different book if I had seen the London records? At first, I was naturally nervous as any researcher would be, writing a book without consulting a major repository! What if I got the story all wrong? We historians pride ourselves on doing as exhaustive research as possible before putting pen to paper. We all aspire to some sort of definitiveness, a longer shelf life even though we know how utterly impossible that goal can be. So I was nervous.

But now, having seen all the London records, I honestly do not believe that I would substantially change anything I have written substantially: revisions at the margins, yes; major amendments, no. To be sure, it would have been good to have seen the records before I wrote the biography, if only because they would have deepened and reinforced many of the conclusions I reached. All important policy discussions found their way into print in one form or another, although not always the thinking which led to a particular policy

recommendation. I will give just a few examples to illustrate the point. It was common knowledge, as Jakeway and Baker confirmed, that official sympathy lay with the Fijians, and that the United Kingdom government would pay close attention to Fijian aspirations and concerns when formulating policy. Nor was there much sympathy for Patel's advocacy of common roll. Fijians and Europeans were opposed and so too was London. That was common knowledge; the London records show just how pervasive that sentiment was.

The extent of London's concern was stated by Julian Amery, the parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, who visited Fiji in 1960 during the sugar cane strike. Upon returning to London, he penned a memorandum whose central concerns echoed in all the major correspondence and political negotiations between Suva and London throughout the 1960s. Amery was a well connected, supremely self-confident and given to expressing sharp, unequivocal opinion.<sup>17</sup> 'The Fijians and Indians are more distinct as communities than Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Greeks and Turks in Cyprus or even Europeans and Bantu in South and Central Africa.' Fijians deeply feared Indian domination, he said, and their confidence in the government had been shaken by reports (Burns and Spate) calling for fundamental overhauling of Fijian institutions and opening up the traditional society to greater individual freedom. He reminded London that it was the Fijians who had been the loyal community, a reference to enthusiastic Fijian participation in the Second World War and in the Malaya campaign in the 1950s. The Fijians provided 75 per cent of the colony's armed forces. 'The islands could hardly be governed without them, let alone against them.' In the circumstances, Amery advised London, it was 'impracticable to think in terms of a single Fijian nation of a common roll'.

Amery's views were widely discussed in the Colonial Office. Many accepted that his prognosis was probably correct though his rhetoric heated. Nonetheless, everyone agreed to respect the Fijian position. Even when Fijians were contemplating some minor concession to common roll, London was not keen to nudge them along. As Jakeway put it, 'some gentle selling of the attractions of a limited common roll element in the next constitutional stage has been done with all three (Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Mara) and does not appear to have fallen on entirely unreceptive ground'. In the 1965 conference, London actively sought to engineer an outcome that would put Fijians in control, within the overarching ambit of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. The conference failed to reach consensus, and the Colonial Office was quick to blame Patel and other members of the Federation Party for the debacle. They started the conference on the 'wrong foot' and spectacularly mishandled their case, as Trafford Smith put it in a confidential letter to Jakeway.

A close and careful reading of the Colonial Office records in fact leads to another conclusion, one which becomes all too obvious when London's thinking is borne in mind. London was concerned to appease the Fijians, and Eireen White, the parliamentary under-secretary and chair of the conference, held private talks with both Ratu Mara and John Falvey, but not with the Indian delegation, to impress upon them the need to meet others halfway. This contradicted the Colonial Office advice that White hold private discussions with all the three parties separately to gauge the extent of compromise each was prepared to make. Trafford Smith was especially critical of the Federation group bringing up the matter of common roll late in the conference proceedings. But the Colonial Office itself had recommended the avoidance of the issue at an early stage to prevent the 'striking of attitudes' which could conceivably lead to a deadlock. To argue later that the Federation group should have declared their hand earlier directly contradicts the Colonial Office advice. Patel told his audiences in Fiji that the London conference was merely a 'rubber stamp' for a constitution already decided by Her Majesty's Government.<sup>18</sup> He was condemned for saying this, but as the records show, he had spoken the truth. He was also right that London's mind was focused elsewhere—on Aden—when the conference took place.

The London records show clearly how personal chemistry between the principal participants played a role in the way events unfolded. Sir Derek Jakeway, coming from Sarawak as its chief secretary, had developed empathy for the Fijian people, had seen them in action against Chinese communist insurgents in Malaya, and in Fiji he was active behind the scenes trying to get the Fijians and Europeans to organise politically.<sup>19</sup> The Alliance Party was in fact his brainchild. The Federation Party attacked Jakeway's partisan statements and even petitioned the Colonial Office for his recall. London denied any impropriety in the governor's behaviour, but once again, suspicions about the governor's bias were well founded.

Fijian leaders were chosen to attend specialised courses in London, and many of them formed close friendships with officials in London. Officials from the Colonial Office were assigned to the visitors, sometimes to help them find accommodation and schools for the children, or take them on tours of London. The closeness was reflected in private letters. During the course of an interview with a visiting official from the Colonial Office, an Indian journalist, Krishnamurthy, collapsed and died. In a handwritten letter, Ratu Mara asked Harold Hall, Assistant Secretary and Head of Pacific and Indian Ocean Department at the Colonial Office, to send more such officials. Humour in extremely bad taste, you might say, but this was not uncommon.<sup>20</sup> Richard Kearsley, a member of the Alliance Party, felt socially close enough to the UK officials at the 1965 conference at Marlborough House to call Patel a 'rat'. John Falvey chimed in 'Of course we all hate the Indians'. The English had a patronising, romantic, affinity

for Fijians and things Fijian,<sup>21</sup> but coolness and distance, perhaps even suspicion and muted hostility, characterised their attitude to the Indo-Fijians, especially their leaders and especially Patel. Many in London and Suva—from Trafford Smith to Sir Robert Foster—expressed open respect for Patel’s intellect and integrity, but personal rapport was absent. No Indo-Fijian politician enjoyed the closeness with European officials that Fijians did.

It did not help matters that in one encounter with Jakeway, Patel humiliated the governor and forced him to back down. Sketchy details are available in the Fiji newspapers, but the full extent of the damage was revealed in the PRO papers. As preparations for the 1965 conference intensified in Fiji, garbled versions of private discussions began to appear in the media and on the Fiji Broadcasting Commission (FBC). The latter came under Patel’s portfolio as Member for Social Services. In one meeting, Patel said that, having studied at the London School of Economics, he could call himself an ‘economist’ and he was an ‘optimist’ about Fiji’s future. The Public Relations Office reported that Patel had called himself a ‘communist’ and an ‘opportunist’! The FBC called Federation leaders ‘badmash’, hooligans. When Patel attacked the Commission for its anti-Federation bias, Jakeway rebuked him and forthrightly asked for his resignation if he could not observe the rules of collective responsibility governing the Membership System. ‘Anything other than a public dissociation from these attacks on the Public Relations Office must bring into question your continued membership of the Executive Council.’ Jakeway was determined to get the better of Patel, determined to discipline him once and for all.

Patel replied that he could not be expected to ‘defend wrongful acts of civil servants or defend them against public criticism’ when he himself, as Member for Social Services, ‘had no power to hold officers in his portfolio to account’. He pointedly reminded the governor of the terms and conditions upon which he had accepted his appointment, saying that his present action did not breach them. He had joined the government, he said, ‘to serve my people—not to forsake them: and I am not prepared to sell my soul for a mess of pottage’. He offered to resign if that was what the Secretary of State wanted. Jakeway had asked the Colonial Office to take a hard line against Patel. Trafford Smith sympathised with Jakeway, but warned him of the ‘serious and far reaching’ consequences of not having Patel, the dominant leader of the Indo-Fijian community, in the Executive Council. Expelling Patel would do the government more harm than good. And, after all, Patel did have a case. There was nothing that Jakeway could do but to bite his tongue, accept this advice, retract his ultimatum, and keep Patel in government. London hoped that the ‘whole incident has not so seriously undermined the confidence of the other communities in the Indians as to make progress between now and the conference impossible’.<sup>22</sup> It had, and Jakeway had to share a part of the blame for the fiasco. I had an inkling of all

this when I was going through the Patel papers and reading the *Pacific Review*: the London records provided the details and clarified the picture.

The 1965 conference was a triumph for the Fijian and European delegation and utter defeat for the Indo-Fijians. Soon after returning from London, some within the Federation Party began questioning whether its constitutionalist stance was appropriate to extract concessions from the British. I was told of a rift between Siddiq Koya and A.D. Patel, indeed a private, potentially party-splitting confrontation in Ba, when Koya threatened to leave the party. Several people confirmed the episode but none knew precisely the cause of the rift between the two men. I mention the episode in the book, but do not, could not, elaborate. The monthly 'Fiji Intelligence Reports' provide one plausible clue. Koya was 'restless with Patel's autocratic control of the party machine and his apparently passive attitude to the outcome of the London conference'.<sup>23</sup> He told his colleagues that Patel's approach had failed and that he wanted to form a 'Subhash Party'. This was after Subhash Chandra Bose, the leader of the Indian National Army, who wanted to eject the British from India by force.

Apisai Tora, whom Koya had defended against the charge of arson in the longest running criminal case in Fiji history (burning down the Korolevu Hotel near Sigatoka) and who had converted to Islam (assuming the name of Mohammed), reportedly told someone that he was twice offered 2,000 pounds by Koya on behalf of the Federation Party if he would pledge his support for 'certain courses of action'.<sup>24</sup> What course of action, the police were unable to ascertain, but 'physical persuasion' was mentioned to embarrass the government and to force a commission of enquiry into the workings of the Native Land Trust Board. I am not convinced that the Federation Party sanctioned the approach. In fact, I doubt it. Patel, Gandhian at heart, the strict constitutionalist, the follower of protocol and procedure, the loyal member of the Middle Temple, would never countenance such a course of action.

The London records, as mentioned before, clarify and amplify, confirm tentative conclusions and deepen understanding of official thinking. But they do not, I think, substantially alter the picture I sought to draw in the book. On many points, they simply confirm my line of enquiry. An important reason for this is that on most matters of importance, Patel published his letters and messages. He recalled conversations with both the governor and officials from the Colonial Office in public, and these found their way into print, especially in the pages of the *Pacific Review*, which Patel founded in 1949 and whose intellectual inspiration he remained throughout. When the 1965 conference broke down, Patel and his colleagues, 'out of respect' for the Secretary of State for the Colonies, accepted the new constitution under protest, but not before writing a lengthy letter to him outlining their reasons for dismay at the final outcome, and promising to 'oppose these proposals by peaceful and constitutional

means'. The letter was published in the *Pacific Review*. So, too, was Greenwood's reply.

This exchange would not have been available to me under the 30-year rule even if I had travelled to London to consult the records. The newspaper is full of such disclosures. Patel's case for the common roll, his views on the problems in the sugar industry, his fraught relations with Ratu Mara,<sup>25</sup> his condemnation of colonialism, his speeches in national and international forums (such as at the 1965 conference in London), the substance of letters people wrote to him, all found their way into the pages of the *Pacific Review*. Besides this journal, the *Hansard* was also an important source of information. Patel first entered the Legislative Council in 1944 and remained a member until 1950. He re-entered the Council in 1963 and remained its member until his death in 1969. The words, in cold print now, do not convey the passion and precision with which they were spoken, but they display a mastery of the language and eloquent thoughts on a range of issues of urgent importance to the country.

I was particularly lucky that Patel left behind a rich collection of private papers. Some had been destroyed in the 1972 hurricane, but many survived. Patel was decidedly old-fashioned in preserving his correspondence. He kept personal letters (the oldest being his letter to Swami Avinashananda in 1939), letters others sent him, drafts of speeches,<sup>26</sup> confidential memoranda he received both as the Member of Social Services and as the Leader of the Opposition, newspaper clippings containing his addresses. Patel's large library contained well-thumbed books on many subjects, but there was a predilection towards philosophy and religion.<sup>27</sup> Patel was a Vaishnavite, a follower of Swami Vivekananda and vice president of the Ramakrishna Mission in Fiji. Together with Swami Rudrananda, his life-long spiritual confidante, he held regular discourses on the *Bhagvada Gita* at the Mission *ashram* (lodge) in Nadi. His political speeches were full of references to Indian philosophical texts. Perusing his papers and his library, I came away with the firm impression that two of Patel's greatest attributes were his brilliant intellect and his deep faith which sustained him in the many political failures and obstacles he encountered in his career.

The personal letters to his children were the most useful and revealing about the man. Much to his wife's distress, Patel never phoned his children whom he had sent to England for private education. Not that he could not afford it: he was a wealthy lawyer and owner of large freehold properties. But, like the English gentlemen of leisure in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, he preferred to communicate with his children through letters. In these letters he advised his children about their course of study, about the need to keep the company of good people, meaning those who were determined to make something of themselves. But he also discussed political developments in Fiji. In one letter to

his eldest son, Atul, he talked of Mara being the 'blue-eyed boy of the British', and complained about the obtuseness of Indian officials towards political developments in Fiji. In a 1967 letter from the Ocean Island to his tiny daughter Vasantika, he wrote about the iniquity perpetrated by the British Phosphate Commission on the Banaban people whose Chief Legal Counsel he was before the United Nations Committee on Decolonisation. His mastery of the language and fluency of his writing are impressive.

It is almost 10 years ago since I published my biography of A.D. Patel, following a decade of interrupted research. Do I still stand by the words I wrote then? Were there things I simply missed, gaps exposed by evidence and papers which have since become available, such as the records at the Public Record Office at Kew Gardens? Can I say with absolute confidence that the broad picture I painted remains intact? Nothing that I have seen since I wrote the book would cause me to change my mind, except on low level details. What the records, which were not available to me when I wrote my book, do is to deepen the picture and sometimes enter qualifications. I wish I had seen them when I wrote the biography, but, fortunately for me, they confirm rather than derogate from the picture I painted then.

Patel has had his critics, and been subject to carping comments from some scholars. But these often say more about the prejudices and intellectual predilections of these individuals than the man they wrote about. Patel was not perfect, as I showed in my book. He could be—often was—stubborn, uncompromising, and haughty towards opponents he considered unprincipled or opportunistic.<sup>28</sup> The worst that was said of Patel, his harshest criticism by officials, was that he was a practitioner of Gandhian politics, but no one ever spelt out precisely what was wrong with Gandhian politics. People told me that Patel was a hard landlord, demanding full rent on time and requiring the highest levels of husbandry of his tenants. That was probably true, but in this Patel was following the example set by others, including the CSR. Many in Fiji will agree that lack of professionalism in agriculture is one of the serious problems facing the sugar cane growers of Fiji.

When all is said and done, what remains beyond doubt is that, 37 years after his death, his vision for Fiji remains as relevant as it was when he was alive. Racial compartmentalisation was no way to build a cohesive multiracial society, Patel had argued all throughout his life. Long before it became fashionable, Patel talked about the nation as an 'imagined community'. Nationalism, for him, he said in 1964, was 'a question of the mind, it [was] not a question of the colour [of skin]'. Patel received bad press during his life time because he questioned the values and assumptions which underpinned the colonial order, although privately, and much later after he was gone, his critics conceded ground. 'A.D. was a fine man', Q.V.L. Weston wrote privately after Patel's death in 1969,



‘stubborn, sometimes too much for comfort’. Weston knew: he was Commissioner Western, colonial officialdom’s principal representative, in the heart of the fiery cane belt in western Viti Levu. But, he added, ‘it was through his stubbornness that he got his way’. He continued: ‘Mixed societies such as Fiji contain a lot of inborn prejudices, which get out of tune with the times and take the leader of the quality and convictions of A.D. to shift. When the tale is told by historians, it will be usually accepted that his way was right’.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Deryck Scarr, *Ratu Sukuna: soldier, statesman, man of two worlds* (London 1980).
- <sup>2</sup> An authorised, partly taxpayer-funded biography of Ratu Mara is currently being written and negotiations are under way for a Ratu Mara Chair in Fijian Studies at the University of Fiji.
- <sup>3</sup> Published in 1997 in the ‘History of Development Studies Series’ by the National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University.
- <sup>4</sup> An extensive collection of documents covering the period 1960 to 1970 has been published in Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Fiji: British documents on the end of empire*, Series B, vol. 10 (London 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Thus Deryck Scarr, the historian of the Fijian establishment, in his Sukuna biography, writes disparagingly about Patel’s role in the 1943 strike, commenting on his ‘new-found patriotism’ (*Ratu Sukuna*, 133). K.L. Gillion, in his *The Fiji Indians: challenge to European dominance, 1920-1946* (Canberra 1977), 172, provides an assessment of the strike that repeats almost verbatim the colonial government’s view: ‘Once again in the history of the Fiji Indians, communalism, factionalism, pettiness and personal political ambition had triumphed over unity and statesmanship’.
- <sup>6</sup> An early result of this interest was my edited collection *Politics in Fiji: studies in contemporary history* (Sydney 1986) and articles on Fiji elections from 1982 onwards.
- <sup>7</sup> Patel’s papers have been microfilmed by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau and will be made available to bona fide scholars, with the permission of the family (for a limited period of time).
- <sup>8</sup> My book on the 1987 coup was *Power and Prejudice: the making of the Fiji crisis* (Wellington 1988, 1990), and my broader history was *Broken Waves: a history of the Fiji Islands in the twentieth century* (Honolulu 1992).
- <sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the National Farmers Union publication *Children of the Indus, 1879-2004: a history of Indians in Fiji portraying the struggles of an immigrant community for justice, equality and acceptance* (Suva 2004).
- <sup>10</sup> These letters are in my papers which will be donated to the Pacific Manuscript Bureau in due course.
- <sup>11</sup> *Fiji Times*, 22 Aug. 1960. On 26 August, the newspaper wrote about political demagogues ‘who would scramble, scuffle and skirmish for power as soon as the Colony came within the sight of substantial measure of self-government’.
- <sup>12</sup> See Sir Malcolm Trustram Eve, *Report of the Fiji Sugar Inquiry Commission* (Suva 1961).
- <sup>13</sup> See *The Award of the Rt. Hon. Lord Denning in the Fiji Sugar Cane Contract Dispute 1969* (Suva 1970).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance, ‘The Sugar Contract Scorecard’, *The Fiji Nation*, October 1969.
- <sup>15</sup> Acting Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 August 1965 in CO 1036/1216, E83.
- <sup>16</sup> CO 1036/1551, no. 1, March 1965. The publisher of the *Fiji Times* was no less anti-Indian. Writing in the *Pacific Islands Monthly* in February 1952, he said ‘I have little liking for the Indians. In the main, they are arrogant and disloyal and are dishonest in so far as their evasion of taxation is concerned’.
- <sup>17</sup> His father Leopold Amery was Secretary of State for India in the 1940s.
- <sup>18</sup> CO 1036/1216/E91, Fiji Intelligence Report, 12 December 1965.
- <sup>19</sup> Jakeway told Nigel Fisher on 17 Jan. 1966 that ‘Behind the scenes I have encouraged the Alliance leaders to look for professional advice on party organisation and running an election campaign, and it was I who gave Falvey the name of Sir William Urton well as those of his counterparts in the other occupants of South Square, the Labour and Liberal Offices. This was done with the knowledge and agreement of Trafford Smith, and also Mrs White’. CO 1036/1586, Jakeway to Nigel Fisher, 17 Jan. 1966.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Vijay R. Singh told me at a dinner with Praveen Chandra Vijendra Kumar in Brisbane in late 2005 another Mara story. As Patel's funeral pyre was alight and as the plane taking Mara and Singh back to Suva flew over the crematorium, Mara called Singh to his side and said, pointing to the fire, 'Look Vijay, give people what they want and they will flock to you'.

<sup>21</sup> The feeling continued. A. Crosbie Walsh, who taught at the University of the South Pacific in the late 1970s, wrote that 'I had a dislike of Indians (a not uncommon attitude held by Europeans seeking to protect Pacific indigenes from every race except their own) and I did not want to be like this'. See his 'A scatter of islands: reminiscences from Tonga, Rarotonga, Niue, and Fiji,' in Eric Waddell and Patrick Nunn (eds), *The Margin Fades: geographical itineraries in a world of islands* (Suva 1993), 106.

<sup>22</sup> See CO 1036/1263 no. 26 and no. 27.

<sup>23</sup> CO 1036/1216, E1/88, Fiji Intelligence Report for September 1965.

<sup>24</sup> See CO 1036/1216, E/91 Fiji Intelligence Report for November 1965.

<sup>25</sup> Mara recalled Patel as a 'brilliant lawyer, an eloquent speaker, a charismatic leader of his party, and a doughty opponent. But it has to be admitted that political negotiation with him had proved difficult, and on occasion impossible. In particular he was irrevocably committed to the policy of common roll as a first step, not as an aim for the future, which we were prepared to concede. Therefore, sad as his death was, and a great loss to the Indian community, it did seem to open up for our negotiations a spirit of compromise that might have been hard to achieve otherwise'. See his *The Pacific Way: a memoir* (Honolulu 1997), 97.

<sup>26</sup> People often told me how Patel could speak for hours scarcely glancing at his notes. The truth was that he carefully composed his speeches, wrote them down and then committed them to memory. Patel had astounding powers of recall.

<sup>27</sup> Among the many philosophy books in the Patel library are several by Nicolas Berdyaev such as *Slavery and Freedom* and the *Destiny of Man*.

<sup>28</sup> As Sir Vijay R. Singh told me in early 2006.