Submissions

No philosopher’s stone of a constitution can produce golden conduct from leaden instincts.

Herbert Spencer

3 July 1995. It is 9am and we are at the Sigatoka Town Council Chambers, having made the two-hour journey from Suva early that morning. A crowd of curious onlookers, local community leaders and prospective speakers is ambling about the two-storey building just outside the town on the way to Nadi. We are greeted politely as we ascend the stairs into the main chamber, a thick folder of written submissions in our arms. Inside, everything is already in place. The Commissioners’ table, with name tags, is at the back. Sir Paul Reeves, the Commission Chairman, sits in the middle, Mr Tomasi Vakatora on his left and I on his right. This will be the pattern throughout.

To our right, at a separate table, sit the Legal Counsel, Alison Quentin-Baxter and Jon Apted. Commission secretary, Walter Rigamoto, is at the same table, to their right. Walter marshals his troops and orchestrates the smooth flow of paper to us, deciding the order of submissions. Directly opposite him, to our left, are the Hansard reporters with their equipment, who will preserve for posterity the verbatim record of the proceedings. The table for the
speakers and interpreters is directly in front of us. We are ready. Sir Paul starts the proceedings, welcoming everyone. This, he says, 'is the beginning of a long process of listening to our people and organisations who wish to come before us'. There is silence in the room, the air thick with anticipation as the first speaker is called and makes his way towards us.

We have a long journey ahead of us. How tense and fraught that journey will be, we have no sense of just yet. But already we have travelled a long way. Just to reach this stage is a miracle of sorts. There was a time, not too long ago, when most people were pessimistic about our prospects. But our appointment is generally well received. Our three-member Commission has been appointed to review Fiji's Constitution, promulgated by a Presidential decree in July 1990. We have been asked to make recommendations for a future constitutional arrangement for Fiji which would promote national unity, racial harmony and the social and economic development of all citizens of the country. But in doing so, we have also been asked to guarantee the protection and promotion of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman communities, to have full regard for the rights, interests and concerns of other communities, and to take into account internationally recognised principles and standards of individual and group rights. The constitution we recommend should meet the needs of Fiji as a multi-ethnic and multiracial society.

It's a tall order, and we are under no illusion that we have been asked to 'square the circle'. We are constantly reminded of the heavy burden of responsibility that rests on our shoulders; such a chance comes but rarely, we are told; we cannot afford to fail. We must show the way forward by reaching consensus amongst ourselves, something that has eluded the political leaders for so long. We have our sympathetic well-wishers, but there are cynics as well. One, a knight of the realm no less, writes in his weekly column that we are a million dollar farce waiting to happen. Even some submitters tell us to our face that we are a farce, which prompts Mr Vakatora to reprimand
them sternly in his own inimitable Speaker’s way. Why bother appearing before us if we are a farce? ‘People will always say such things,’ he assures us. He knows: he is a battle-hardened former politician. But I suppose our critics have a point. They have seen so many commissions come and go in the last few years, the fate of their reports sealed at the moment of conception. But we are undaunted. We have our Terms of Reference, unanimously approved by Parliament. We have our staff. We are in business.

We spend the first month planning our work. Critical decisions about the method of our work have to be made. The public debate that our reference requires us to carry out: how should that be done? Someone somewhere suggests that all the hearings should be in camera, out of the public eye, to prevent posturing and the politicisation of the process. The process of public consultation should be brief and largely symbolic; after all, we all know what the attitudes are; we could glean them from submissions made to previous constitutional commissions. Nothing much has changed between 1990 and now. We reject that option. Public consultation, the Commission agrees, must be fair, open, transparent, inclusive and thorough. Moreover, we should pro-actively reach out to the people, visit their provinces, districts, villages and settlements, wherever they want us to come. The people should be bound into the process for, after all, it is their constitution that we are reviewing. No one should have any reason to feel excluded.

Mr Vakatora, who has done this before as a member of the Falvey Commission in 1987, gives us the benefit of his enormous practical knowledge of the geography of the country, the logistics of travelling, when, where, how. Our itinerary is announced over the air and published in all three main languages in the newspapers. Walter swings into action. Venues for public hearings are arranged, vehicles and drivers assembled, photocopying facilities rented from local bodies, paper and ink purchased, interpreters hired, Hansard reporters and technicians borrowed from the Parliament, hotel accommodation
for the Commission booked. The sheer professionalism of the office staff is impressive. By the time we reach Sigatoka, all the i's have been dotted and all the t's crossed.

Mr Isikeli Nadalo is the first to make a submission before us. I know the name, of course: farmer, founding president of the Nadroga Cane Growers Association in the late 1950s, long-time member of the National Federation Party, former parliamentarian. Karam Ramrakha, an erstwhile NFP leader, once told me that Mr Nadalo had one of the most astute political minds in Fiji. I see him in person for the first time. He is formally attired, black pants, white shirt and tie; he has a sad, weather-beaten look about him, with a steel-grey thinning crop of hair. I feel deeply moved to see him at the table in front of us, with all that wealth of experience of battles won and lost, witness to so many dashed hopes and vanished dreams. And yet, despite all the setbacks and heartaches and all the calls to ethnic chauvinism, he still has that unvanquished flicker of optimism in a multiracial future for Fiji.

Mr Nadalo welcomes us to Sigatoka. 'We know that the task before you is tremendous and challenging but we rely entirely on your wisdom for a much better constitution that will be produced after the whole work is completed,' he says to us in his deep, sincere voice and beautifully cadenced English, a legacy of solid education of the colonial days. He has given us his written submission, and now proceeds to amplify and amend points already made in writing. Fiji should continue to be a sovereign democratic state; the Presidency should be rotated among the four traditional confederacies of Kubuna, Tovata, Burebasaga and (as yet to be recognised) Nakuravakarua. Mr Nadalo is baffled by the logic underpinning the distribution of seats under the 1990 Constitution. His own formula, based on population size is 35 seats for Fijians, 30 for Indo-Fijians, 4 for General Electors and 1 for Rotuma. He explains that the 'distribution of seats, as far as democracy goes, should be based entirely on population, because Parliament is the law and here we are dealing with the people'.
Fiji, Mr Nadalo says, must be home to all the different races who have settled there. He seeks reversion to the old system of mixed communal and non-communal voting. The Senate should be retained as a House of Review, its composition as under the 1970 Constitution. The Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act should not be entrenched legislation because it infringed the rights of landowners to reclaim their land when the leases expired. And finally, there should be a periodic review of the constitution, say every ten years, to take account of the changing circumstances. We ask questions, seek clarifications, probe — and provoke — new lines of enquiry. From his responses it is clear that Mr Nadalo wants a constitution reflecting the spirit of the 1970 document. His allotted time of 15 minutes is up. Mr Nadalo gathers his papers, bows and walks out of the chamber. He has some business to attend to in town before heading off to his village. We don't see him again.

We resume after morning tea. Local leaders of the Arya Samaj, a reformist branch of Hinduism, are next. In a well-prepared submission, which will be repeated — worse, read word for word — countless times in the days and weeks ahead, the Commission is told about the hardships facing the Indo-Fijian community and why the 1990 Constitution is not acceptable to them. After a brief recital of the history of the Samaj, its philosophy and contribution to the development of modern Fiji, the presenters get to the point. They reject the Constitution because it was imposed on the Indo-Fijian community 'who had no meaningful say in its formulation'. The Constitution discriminated against them, denied them fundamental human rights, deepened their sense of alienation; affirmative action policies discriminated against them. Their people 'did not come here as colonisers or conquerors but as indentured labourers (which is an euphemistic word for slavery)'. It was humiliating to be told four or five generations later that their rights are inferior to those of the other communities in their own homeland.

So what was the way forward? The new constitution should recognise the multi-ethnic character of the country, provide for power
sharing by all communities; it should ‘enable Fiji to solve its serious social and economic problems such as land, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, et cetera’; guarantee the security of agricultural leases; provide specific recognition of a permanent place for the Indo-Fijians, secure adequate racial representation for them in the armed forces, promote the values of democracy and equality, heal the communal wounds of the past and treat men and women equally, move towards a non-racial electoral system, and sanction institutions and processes to ensure open, accountable, effective administration. It is an exhaustive list. The presenters, or whoever wrote the submission, have done their homework. We did not know it then, but the concerns expressed in this submission would be repeated in different ways and to different degrees in most Indo-Fijian submissions throughout the country.

The Fijian submissions, at least in Sigatoka, are less formally structured and generally shorter; sometimes, Fijian elders sitting at the back of the room are spurred to spontaneous submissions by what they have just heard. Ratu Iosa Makutu, a gentle and soft-spoken high chief, speaks through the interpreter and welcomes us to Nadroga. He wants a less confrontational type of democracy in Fiji, greater devolution of power to the provinces, and the progressive reinvigoration of the Fijian traditional system ‘to protect our indigenous rights, not to hold us down in the dark ages’.

Mr Tomasi Matainadroga, representing 18 Methodist congregations in the Sigatoka circuit, is firm. The 1990 Constitution is quite acceptable to this country because it allows the recognition of the rights and aspirations of the indigenous Fijians whereas, during colonial leadership era, the indigenous Fijians were deprived of such rights as they were given to foreigners. The land issue should not be debated in Parliament; Sunday Ban should be maintained in a strict observance of the Sabbath; non-Fijians should have the freedom to carry out whatever businesses they wish, but they ‘should be mindful of giving a fair share of their return to the indigenous landowners from [whose land] they are operating [their] businesses’. Ratu Jalesi
Dredre and Ratu Tevita Dikedike, Tui Nabuavatu and Tui Davutukia, respectively, raise the issue of Fijian war service in the cause of the British Empire. Chiefs ‘had been blessed by the Almighty God to the leadership of our country’, and unless chiefly leadership was given its due recognition, ‘problems will arise among the different races living in this country’.

We finish late and head for a night’s rest at the Fijian Resort before moving on to Nadi the following day. I am exhausted and not a little apprehensive about what lies ahead. Already, I can see the faint outlines of two entrenched and seemingly irreconcilable positions before us: change versus no change, or only minimal change. There would be voices seeking the middle ground, counselling moderation and emphasising values common to all humanity, but these would be rare. Gradually the momentum builds. The radio and newspaper coverage is extensive, often highlighting the more sensational bits, but it’s the television coverage that is unique. Television is new to Fiji, just a few years old, and the object of national fascination. Every night, for weeks, we are a regular feature on the evening news. The words, the gestures, the emotions are dissected. Which group is making how many submissions, where, how; how much air time is given to the different communities; will the Commission be swayed by the sheer volume of submissions given by the different groups? For us, the novelty soon wears off; it’s all in a day’s work.

Having decided to go to the people, we plan to travel extensively throughout the country to all the major centres of the two main islands, to all the provinces, to important centres within provinces. We travel by car, by aeroplane, by boat, all the recording equipment and staff in tow. The three Commissioners travel in separate vehicles, which gives us time for reflection, for catching up on the written submissions already received, for making connections between submissions and notes of points to be clarified, for gauging the pulse of the public. Each submission is read and re-read for what is said and, sometimes more importantly, for what is left unsaid. I make
mental notes of the tone and tenor of the oral submissions, and the intensity of the exchange between the Commissioners and the submitters. We don’t discuss the submissions amongst ourselves; each of us keeps his own counsel. It would remain that way throughout. We talk about many things, about sports, the weather, the landscape, everything except what we have heard or what we think of what we have heard. We will each make up our minds independently. Meanwhile, having taken our oath of secrecy, we will have to deal with any inner doubts by ourselves.

In my case there are many. As a historian of Fiji, I have a fairly good understanding of the dynamics of the country’s history. I am aware of the previous attempts at constitution making, the kinds of issues that were raised and the kinds of solutions proposed; and reading, analysis and synthesis are part and parcel of my trade. Still, I am apprehensive about my handicaps, a lack of practical experience of politics, the enormous amount of private catching-up to do in areas I know little about, such as international conventions which bear on human, civil and indigenous rights, the unspoken pressures and expectations from the public. I constantly remind myself to be alert to new opportunities and fresh perspectives, not to be trapped by old and exhausted orthodoxies of the past. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the intensity and loneliness of this exercise. Writing a dissertation for three anonymous examiners is bad enough, but this is madness. A failed thesis is a private failure; but failure in an exercise like this would bring upon me a fate worse than death.

We see a lot of the country, places I had never visited before, places I am not likely to visit again. I am beginning to see how diverse and beautiful Fiji really is. Taveuni, the Garden Isle of Fiji, is just magical; Rotuma has a rugged tropical charm of its own; Lomaloma, surrounded by the turquoise blue sea, is really — take my word for it — as pretty as the picture postcards depict it. The interior of Viti Levu is awe-inspiring, with its majestic mist-draped mountains and valleys, the sparkling rivulets that meander through the valleys; people on horseback
going about their business; the blue smoke from cooking fires rising in the distance and drifting towards the hills.

Labasa, my own home town, is dry and dusty, with a stunted and deserted look about it; jobs are few and most of the younger people have left for Viti Levu; some have even migrated overseas, which would have been unheard of a decade ago. But the exuberant growth of Seaqaqa, with tar-sealed roads, shopping centres and schools, surprises me. There was a time, not too long ago, when Seaqaqa was bush, at the back of beyond, the subject of much patronising comment from us sophisticated Tabia residents. No father in his right mind would entertain marrying his daughter in that remote bush-village, unless, of course, there was some good reason. Not anymore; it's the other way round. Now, Tabia is the one that is caught in a cul-de-sac while Seaqaqa is going places.

Mr Vakatora's knowledge of Fijian geography and history is staggering. He knows the folklore and cultural peculiarities of virtually every place we visit, and he shares them generously. He is a deeply proud Fijian and a very knowledgeable man. I am sometimes embarrassed at how little I know, how much more I have to learn, how bookish my knowledge of the country has been. I realise that the written history of Fiji is but a minute fragment of the lived human experience in the islands. An obvious point, you might say, but this experience powerfully underlines it. I wonder, too, how much the non-Fijians really know about the intricate patterns of Fijian culture, the role and place of structured, ranked relationships and symbolism in it, the absence of malice inherent in the generosity of the Fijian people. I think we are the poorer for not embracing the finer aspects of the taukei culture as our own.

We receive submissions in a variety of places. In urban areas, it is usually in municipal chambers. In Indo-Fijian settlements, it is usually in a school building or a community hall. The atmosphere in these places is often less formal, businesslike. But in many Fijian areas, it is different, daunting. By the time we arrive, people are already seated on mats, and
usually the room is full to capacity. We are greeted with a formal welcome ceremony. We have our own *matanivanua*, herald, and a bundle of *yaqona* as *sevusevu*, ceremonial presentation. We respond, and make our humble offering. After a few meetings, I begin to recognise the string of words that are spoken, the gestures that are made, the particular way hands are cupped to clap. After the speeches, *yaqona* is ceremonially prepared in an impressive *tanoa* placed in the centre of the room.

Each province has its own distinctive way of preparing the drink. Gradually I begin to appreciate the central importance of *yaqona* to Fijian cultural and ceremonial life. Indo-Fijians do not attach much customary or cultural significance to *yaqona* beyond (as I remember from my childhood years) offering the first bowl to the invisible but ubiquitous ‘*taukei*’ in the corner of the thatched house, symbolically appeasing the spirit of the land; but they are addicted to it now. So much so that several submitters ask us to ban the consumption of *yaqona* in public places. Sir Paul is offered the first bowl, then Tom and then (often but not always) me. By the time the welcoming ceremonies are over, an hour has passed. The western-trained academic in me sometimes regrets the loss of work hours. But I remind myself that it is I who is driven by the clock, even enslaved by it; and these ceremonies performed with such solemn grace and deportment are ancient. I should cherish the moment. I am getting a valuable lesson in cultural education.

I am impressed by the seriousness and respect with which we are treated everywhere, even, or especially, by people who are opposed to our work or cynical about its eventual fate. I am touched by many simple rural folk who have gone to great lengths, and expense, to appear before us. They are unfamiliar with our procedures; many probably have never seen the inside of a courtroom before. But they come in, say their piece and then leave. Each of them, irrespective of who or what they are, is given equal time and attention. Sometimes, people articulate local concerns which have little relevance to the task at hand. Rapists should be castrated, someone asks us to recommend. A disgruntled
Submissions

student in Navua asks us to recommend a more lenient pass mark for law courses at USP. Someone suggests that it would be a good idea to have everyone wear the Fijian dress: he wanted the public face of Fiji to be symbolically Fijian. A submitter in Nausori urged us to recommend against the immigration of Chinese who were threatening their lifestyle in the hills, while another person wanted us to say something about stray animals which were damaging good neighbourly relations.

Many Indo-Fijians are deeply concerned about the impending expiry of native leases, under-representation and shrinking opportunities in the public sector, the paucity of university scholarships for students, the vandalism of places of worship, increasing incidents of domestic violence. They say that they get along well with their Fijian neighbours; it is the leaders in Suva who are causing all the problem. In Fijian villages, there is concern with royalties from the extraction of minerals or from logging, compensation for environmental damage caused by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, the breakdown of the traditional order, the problems of youth, the desire to prevent the marginalisation of the Fijian people in the land of their ancestors, and the discord and dissension caused by the arrival of new Christian sects in the villages.

People use many metaphors to express their thoughts. Perhaps the most common metaphor used by the Fijian submitters is that of a house. Fiji is likened to a house, and the Fijian people its owners. They will welcome outsiders, generously share whatever they have, treat them kindly, but everyone should know who is the owner (taukei) and who is the guest (vulagi). An urban Fijian puts the same thought differently. 'A guest can't be governor, doc,' he says smiling, obviously pleased at the concision with which he has expressed his view. Unless that fundamental distinction is understood, we are told, there can be no lasting solution to Fiji's constitutional problems.

Some Indo-Fijians use the metaphor of Fiji as a mother: we are all her children, each equal in her eyes and worthy of equal love. Some use the metaphor of the human body to emphasise the reality of
interdependence: we need eyes to see, heart to dream, limbs to move, brain to think. We would be the poorer without any of these. Some use the metaphor of a flower garden. One lady likened the process of nation building to a bank balance: if you keep withdrawing without putting something in, you will soon become bankrupt. 'The rice is cooked,' one woman says, drawing our attention to the futility of raking over the past. One person wanted 'peace without pollution', while another wanted to 'Ask for what is right, not what is more'. There are no bad parliamentarians, just bad voters, we hear someone say. Another urges caution and sensitivity in speech by using the analogy of bullets: once fired, you cannot get the bullet back. Such wisdom so eloquently expressed. Ilai Kuli, the fiery Naitasiri parliamentarian, says that Fiji is big enough for 'both Peter and Prasad', while someone else says that 'You can't make bread without a tiny bit of yeast'.

We asked one person who was extolling the virtues of the 1970 Constitution why the coup occurred if that was such a perfect document. Without blinking an eyelid, he said: 'The people who overthrew the constitution will be able to answer that.' A lawyer asks me not to ask him about the Bill of Rights. 'Ask me about Bill of Sales.' I think he meant it, too. One person said that there should be no Indians in Fiji's Parliament. Why?, I ask. 'We follow the parliamentary proceedings in India. There is no other race represented in their Parliament.' In Naitasiri, Ratu Sakiusa Navokaroko, Tui Nabobuco, was drawing our attention to the need for his people to get more royalties from the extraction of resources from his area. Mr Vakatora asked him: 'You said that the landowners' ownership of the land should go right down to the bottom of the earth. What about the air above, do you want to control that, too?' Out came the instantaneous reply: 'We want the ownership of land and sea and all that is in them. The Confederacy of Burebasaga could be given the ownership of the atmosphere.'

My own favourite example comes from Labasa. Three representatives of a women's association arrived early in the morning
and sat at the back of the room. One of them was from my own village, a year ahead of me in primary school. As they watched the proceedings, they decided, they told me during the lunch break, that they would not make any submission, daunted by the prospect (as they saw it) of hostile questions from us. But just as we were about to close for the day, they came forward: ‘Today we waited and waited and were given the last [time slot] to give our submissions. From eight o’clock we have been here and we were allowed to speak just a couple of minutes ago.’ ‘That’s a very long wait,’ Mr Vakatora said. ‘That shows what men are,’ they said with a straight face! Pleased with their newly found courage, they said it was quite outrageous that there was not a single woman on the Commission. They quieten down when Tom points to the presence of Alison at the table.

Most of the Fijians who appear before us, even those with a perfect command of English, speak in their own language. It is a symbolically powerful demonstration of the vitality of the Fijian language, a people’s deep pride in their own culture and heritage. Many would be happy to make Fijian the national language. Most Indo-Fijians prefer to speak in English. I am surprised at their fluency, and note that the older generation has a better command of the language. But sometimes, what is meant is not what comes out, and we enjoy a light moment or two.

One person said rather forcefully that we must eliminate this ‘academic’ of violence, which alarmed me, but he meant ‘epidemic’. Another, trying to impress the Commission with the contribution his community had made to the economic development of Fiji, said that Indians were the ‘backside’ of Fiji, meaning ‘backbone’. There was one person who demanded the death penalty for ‘sedation’, meaning ‘sedition’. In Seacaqa, an old Indian man was asked about what young men were doing in the villages where we saw no visible signs of employment. ‘Oh, they just fuck around,’ he said in a matter-of-fact way, using the omnibus village expression for idling around. One man said that the 1990 Constitution, like good wine, should be left for
sometime to mature, when someone else responded that bad wine left for too long turns to vinegar. One person said that the voting age should not be reduced to 18 because then Parliament would be full of school children. He himself was a parliamentarian. Tom asked another parliamentarian whether he believed in affirmative action. Yes, came the reply, 'I believe in firm action'.

The process of local consultations is exhaustive and exhausting. By the time it is all over, we have received over 800 oral and written submissions, all of which will have to be re-read and understood. Looking back, I am amazed at how much we were able to achieve in such a short time. I recall the tension and the theatre of the staged confrontations, the gestures of some hostile submitters with agendas of their own, who would later put their arms around my shoulders after a bowl of grog, and say: 'It's all politics, doc, don't mind.' They were looking for free publicity for their own causes and election campaigns.

I also remember friends and family members sitting in the audience, watching me, assessing my performance with a quizzical smile on their faces. I recall Mr Deo Narayan and Mr Santa Prasad Mangal, my secondary and primary school teachers respectively, hugging me proudly as one of their pupils who had made good. ‘You have put us on the map,’ they said, echoing what the Chairman of the Macuata Provincial Council, Ratu Emosi Vuakatagane, had said about ‘one of us’ from the much neglected Vanua Levu region being on the Commission. I remember seeing my aged illiterate father, a tower of strength and reassurance to all his children, sitting at the back of the audience in Labasa, watching his son in sahib's dress of tie and suit, talking a language he couldn't comprehend, clearly ill at ease in a quasi-judicial ambience. He died a week before we finished our work. I sometimes wonder what he would have thought of our report.

In the beginning we were a commission of complete strangers. But the shared ordeals of hectic travel, continuous commissioning and sustained interaction on a daily basis enabled us to understand each other a little better. The earlier tentativeness and caution in
conversation gave way to a more relaxed mood, our talks sprinkled with laughter and jokes. The ice was broken. One of my greatest and most unexpected rewards has been my friendship with Mr Vakatora. It developed gradually, over many months. At first we were naturally suspicious of each other, being put on the Commission by two opposing sides. We are as different from each other as chalk from cheese, separated by culture, age and experience. He is a formidable seasoned politician, while I have no practical experience of politics at all; he has never been to university while I have spent all my adult life in university classrooms. But in an ironic kind of way, our different backgrounds brought us together as we appreciate and learn from each other’s talent and expertise.

Mr Vakatora is a tough man of explosive temper, as many a submitter discovered to their enormous discomfort. He is particularly tough on those who try to be clever. I recall the first of our formal Commission meetings. It was a pleasant enough encounter. ‘See, there is no blood on the floor, Tom,’ I said, pleased at the way things had gone. Back came the immediate reply: ‘Not yet’. ‘What have I let myself into,’ I say to myself. But over time, I begin to see another side of him, as a thoughtful, sensitive and fundamentally fair man with an overarching, inclusive vision for Fiji. I come to realise, as I listen to him, that we are not really as far apart as the public believes we are. We are both determined to find a common, mutually acceptable ground, encouraged by Sir Paul. If you two agree among yourselves, I won’t stand in your way, he says to us. With time, respect is transformed into trust, and trust into friendship. The most touching moment for me came the day before we submitted our report. Tom skippered a boat from Walu Bay to Nasilai Reef, with Wai, Padma and me. We go to where the Syria was wrecked in 1884 and later visit the site where the drowned were buried. The graves by the sea are covered with bush, which saddens Tom. ‘Our people saved your people,’ he says to me proudly, ‘and together we will save all our people now.’ We both share a quiet laugh as the enormity of that statement dawns upon us.
We have gathered a massive amount of material. Cacophonous voices, a blurred collage of conflicting testimonies linger in the memory along with the collective, inchoate desire of most people from all ethnic groups and walks of life to escape from the predicaments of contemporary Fijian politics caused by a destructive obsession with ethnicity. Will we be able to square the circle? Will we be able to come up with a unanimous report? These questions remain uppermost in my mind. Once I asked someone for specific guidance on how the various suggestions he was making could be formulated more precisely. Back came the quick reply: 'Sir, you are the cook. I have told you what I want for dinner. It is your job to prepare it, not mine.' Fair enough. For the next six months, we would sit each day behind closed doors, out of the public gaze, and discuss the questions that human beings have asked for centuries, about the nature and purpose of government, about the values, assumptions and understandings that should inform political relationships in complex societies, about the tension between the rights that individuals want to keep to themselves and those they voluntarily cede to the state, about the need to preserve the unique — and uniquely rich — traditions and cultural heritage of a country within the overarching collective of values that humanity has embraced as universal. We talk about what we had heard in the submissions, and try to come up with a recipe that would find broad acceptance among the people of Fiji.