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The road to independence 1874—1970

Some basic facts first. Fiji Islands, covering some 1.3 million kilometres of the South Pacific Ocean, lie between the longitudes of 175 and 178 west and the latitudes of 15 and 22 south. Most of Fiji's population lives on the two major islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Its total population of 772,655 (1996 census) comprises 394,999 Fijians (51.1 per cent) and 336,579 Indo-Fijians (43.6 per cent), with the remaining 41,077 coming from other ethnic groups (5.3 per cent). Nearly half of the population now lives in urban or peri-urban areas, a significant increase over the previous decade when 39 per cent lived there. Interestingly, now over 40 per cent of indigenous Fijians live in urban areas. Tourism is the main foreign exchange earner for Fiji, followed by the garment industry, sugar, fisheries, gold and such niche products as mineral water. More recently, remittance from Fiji residents working abroad has become an important contributor to the national economy. Fiji became a British Crown Colony in 1874 and attained its independence in 1970.

Fiji's self-image at the time of independence was of a three-legged stool. The three legs were the indigenous Fijian, the Indo-Fijian and the European communities. Each of them was seen as distinct and separate in their culture, history and economic position, largely homogenous in their own internal social and cultural configurations, but interlinked to the overarching national structure, making their unique contribution through their own separate compartments. The Fijians provided the land for economic development, the Indo-Fijians provided the labour and Europeans the capital. Since the contribution of the three groups was deemed to be equally valid, none alone (except the indigenous Fijians,

but more on that later) was to enjoy privileges and rights greater than others. Equality of group representation, irrespective of population size, was to be the basis of political representation. The colonial government positioned itself as the neutral, benevolent, disinterested arbiter of conflict between the three main groups. Edward Said's observation is apt: 'the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting' (1993:xix).

This was a comforting metaphor for a complex, conflicted reality. In truth, none of the three ethnic groups was homogenous. Religious and cultural divisions racked the Indo-Fijian community, along with class. Europeans feared being swamped by part-Europeans with whom they were grouped together for voting purposes. Class and regional differences divided the Fijians, as they do today. There was no equivalence—or balance, to use the colonial vocabulary—between Indo-Fijian labour on the one hand and European capital on the other. Nor, it has to be said, was colonial rule as benevolent as its champions argued. The metaphor served the interests of the colonial officialdom, but did grave disservice to Fiji's complex history, for which the country is still paying a heavy price. It is to the evolution of that complex history that I now turn.

The foundations of modern Fiji were laid when it became a British colony in 1874.¹ Reluctantly acquired, Britain expected Fiji to become economically self-sustaining in the quickest possible time. But the conditions for rapid economic development were absent. European planters, numbering around 2,000 in the mid 1870s, were insolvent. Indigenous Fijians were dispirited and restless, having lost one-third of the population to an epidemic of measles accidentally introduced from Australia. To make matters worse, large parts of fertile Fijian lands were being claimed by European settlers and speculators.

Fiji's first resident governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, promulgated a set of policies that settled Fiji's future for more than a century. He instituted a system of 'indirect rule' designed, he said, to 'seize the spirit in which native institutions had been framed, and develop to the utmost extent the capacities of the people for the management of their own affairs, without exciting their suspicions or destroying their self-respect' (see, among others, France 1969; Legge 1958; Chapman 1964). To that end, he formalised a council of chiefs to advise him on Fijian concerns and problems. The council, entrenched in the 1997 constitution, retains its status as the supreme advisory body to government on matters affecting the Fijian community. It nominates the president and vice president, and its nominees in the Senate enjoy the

power of veto over all legislation affecting Fijian land, customs and customary rights. While the Council continues to enjoy broad respect, some of its activities in recent years—approving a constitution and then lending support to those who wanted it abrogated—and its apparent manipulation by politicians have tarnished its image.

Gordon's land policies ensured that 83 per cent of all land remained inalienably in Fijian ownership, under the correct that, without land, the traditional Fijian society would collapse and suffer the fate of other dispossessed communities in the Pacific islands. Today, as Crown land (Schedules A and B—either not claimed by any landowning units or whose owners had died out) has come under the jurisdiction of the Native Land Trust Board, more than 90 per cent of all land in Fiji is now owned by the indigenous community although it has to be said that large portion of it is unsuitable for agriculture.² Gordon decreed that the Fijian people should be freed from the pressures of commercial employment and allowed to progress at their own pace in their own traditional surroundings, paying tax in kind rather than cash, and tending to their subsistence lifestyle in their age-old fashion. For nearly a century, the Fijians had their own separate court system, their own provincial administration, native regulations and strictly observed schedule of work in the villages. Their isolation from the mainstream of colonial society was almost complete.

Gordon's policies were well-intentioned, but over time they became encrusted in orthodoxy (see France 1969; Thomas 1990).³ A once-fluid situation, represented by dynastic wars and warring chiefdoms, was frozen by fiat, uniform codes and customary practices imposed on a diverse and complex society where none had existed before, and certain cooperative regions were rewarded in leadership and political status over others. Chiefly hierarchy and privileges (such as the *lala*, offering the first fruits of the land to chiefs) were entrenched and enforced with law. Gordon had intended for his policies to be reviewed after 25 years, enough time, he felt, for a distressed community to achieve some stability. But when the moment came, officials balked and the opportunity for review and reform was missed. Sadly, Fijians watched uncomprehendingly, cocooned in their subsistence sector, as the world around them changed and moved on and the tentacles of a capitalist economy spread.

From the very beginning, Fijians were led to believe that in the colony their interests would be 'paramount'; and the phrase 'paramountcy of Fijian interests', mistakenly attributed to the Deed of Cession, was often

invoked throughout the twentieth century both by the Fijians themselves and by European settlers to block political change. But the phrase was originally intended to be used in a protective sense. That is, in the management of Fijian affairs, the government would give 'paramount' importance to the views of the Fijian people and their leaders. Over the course of the twentieth century, particularly as independence loomed, the phrase came to acquire another, more assertive, meaning—that, in the broader scheme of things, Fijians would enjoy rights and privileges over and above those of their fellow citizens. The view came to be asserted that only Fijian political control could ensure the paramouncy of Fijian interests.

To solve the problem of capital, Gordon turned overseas. Having seen the success of plantation economies in the Caribbean and Mauritius—he had been governor of Trinidad and Mauritius before coming to Fiji—he chose the plantation economy as his preferred mode of economic development, and sugar cane as the plantation crop. He invited the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company to extend its operations in Fiji, which it did in 1882, and remained there until 1973, dominating the economic life of the colony and in the process exercising preponderant influence on its affairs (see Moynagh 1981). To work the plantations, Gordon imported Indian indentured labour. Between 1879, when emigration began, and 1916 when it ended, more than 60,000 men and women and children arrived in the colony (see Gillion 1962; Lal 2000b). When their five-year contracts expired, the government encouraged them to stay on. Most did. Out of the experience of indenture emerged a new society, more egalitarian, enterprising and driven by desperation, seeking, as W.E.H. Stanner puts it, 'peaceful seepage into every opening left unclosed and a tenacious defence of every position once occupied' (1953:179). Isolated, struggling, self-absorbed and vulnerable, the Indo-Fijian community was just as caught up in its own internal affairs, adjusting to the requirements of their new adopted homeland, and just as myopic about its long-term interests as the Fijian community.

Indentured emigration was sanctioned by the Government of India on the broad understanding that the indentured labourers who decided to settle in the colonies would enjoy rights equal to the other British subjects there. Europeans and even some colonial officials disputed the spirit of the undertaking and questioned its application to Fiji. But the historical record is clear. The assurance of equality was periodically reinstated.

The whole tenor of the correspondence between India and the colony shows that it was on this condition that indentured immigration in Fiji has been allowed in the past, and any measures leading towards lowering the political status of the immigrants or reducing their economic freedom would, in our opinion, involve a breach of faith with those affected (Lal 1997a:6).

Throughout their political struggle in the twentieth century, Indo-Fijian leaders would continue to cite the principle of parity in support of their cause.

After the end of their indentures, the freed Indians settled on leased land, and continued to work mainly in the sugar industry as growers and mill workers, as did their descendants for several generations. The community diversified and grew, outnumbering indigenous Fijians in the mid 1940s, in the process spawning publicly aired and politically charged fears about 'Indian domination' (see Gillion 1977; Mayer 1973). But while remaining on the land, the Indo-Fijians established schools, often without government help, seeing education as the way out of the vagaries of life on leased land. In time, most settlements had a primary and even a secondary school whose students over the years filled the junior ranks of the civil service, and from the 1950s onwards, the professions as lawyers, doctors, nurses and accountants. Fijians, too, had their own schools—with longer histories, and government support—but their educational success was limited. Cultural factors, emphasising group solidarity and the virtue of subordinating individual interests to communal interests, rural isolation and poor educational facilities played their part.⁴ Moreover, Fijian leaders actively discouraged 'academic' education for ordinary Fijians. The few opportunities for higher education were reserved for people of chiefly rank. As the starkest example of this, the Great Council of Chiefs declined to offer a university scholarship to Rusiate Nayacakalou, a commoner who later emerged as the most brilliant Fiji-born social scientist of the twentieth century. Nayacakalou completed his university education on a private scholarship given by an European business house, Morris Hedstrom (Firth and Tarte 2001).

If the disparity in the educational opportunities for the two communities was one problem that would haunt Fiji in the future, another was the monoracial character of its schools. The Queen Victoria School (opened in 1907) was exclusively Fijian while most schools in the sugarcane belt were predominantly Indo-Fijian by virtue of population distribution. Multiracial schools were mostly Christian and set up in urban areas. The children of the two communities, then, attending their own

racially oriented schools, and firmly tethered to their own cultural ethos and values, had few opportunities to acquire knowledge of each other's culture and language, and of the deeper impulses which drove them. And yet, students from these schools would be called on later to play a vital role on the national stage, a task for which, because of their cross-culturally limited education, they were spectacularly ill-suited. It is no wonder that Fiji has faltered in its post-independence journey. The tragedy is that little is being done even now to rectify the situation. On the contrary, government policy, through special subsidies and grants, provides inducement for Fijian children to attend predominantly Fijian schools even though in many urban areas mixed schools are the norm.

The minuscule European population occupied the apex of the colonial social and economic pinnacle. They dominated the retail and wholesale commerce of the colony, owned copra plantations and shipping companies and occupied a pride of place in colonial administration. They had their own racially segregated clubs and exclusive voluntary associations and schools. In the twentieth century, they began to move to urban towns and centres. The community was not homogenous, though, with fine lines of demarcation differentiating the various nationalities that comprised it. Europeans of all hues saw themselves as superior to part-Europeans who, for electoral purposes, were grouped with them. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some prominent Europeans, dissatisfied with the policies of the local government, tried to have Fiji annexed to New Zealand, but when that alternative failed, they agitated for a privileged place in colonial politics (Lal 1992). Paramountcy for Fijians, parity for Indo-Fijians and privilege for Europeans—these three conflicting ideas informed the political discourse in colonial Fiji.

From the very beginning, the electoral system in Fiji was race-based.⁵ The colonial government saw this as natural and desirable. In part, it reflected its own interests: with the three communities locked in their own separate compartments, the colonial government could play the role of impartial referee. The government did little to encourage the communities to forge common, multiracial links among themselves. Europeans were accorded elected representation in 1904, Indo-Fijians in 1929 and indigenous Fijians in 1963. Before then, Fijian representatives in the Legislative Council were nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs. Each group had equal representation irrespective of population size. Under the Letters Patent of 1937, which remained in force until 1963, the three communities had five representatives each.

Three of the five Indo-Fijians and Europeans were elected by their group and two nominated by the governor, while all five Fijians were nominated by the Council of Chiefs.

This arrangement was frequently questioned after World War II to make the political representation more accurately reflect the demographic, social and economic changes sweeping Fiji, as well as Whitehall's commitment to gradual self-government for the colonies. Specifically, advocates of constitutional change wanted elected representatives to be more directly involved in policymaking. This demand for constitutional change was led not by Indo-Fijians, but by a group of Europeans. Their goal was not the removal of racial representation; they wanted that maintained. They wanted the system of nomination abolished for everyone, including the Fijians. Fijians were opposed to the extension of election. Why, they asked, change the system of government when that system was working satisfactorily? A democratic system of government did not suit the Fijian people (see Lal 1997b). A universal franchise would be open to abuse and corruption and manipulation by selfish individuals. Chiefs were the natural leaders of their people and it was un-Fijian to trust critical decisions to commoners. Fijian fears about the security of their rights were exacerbated by the rapid increase in Indo-Fijian population. The Fijian Affairs Board asked Whitehall to take a firmer line with Indo-Fijian politicians and others misguidedly agitating for constitutional reform. Colonial rule had been good for the Fijians. It had preserved their social and cultural institutions—their way of life. They therefore saw no need for change.

Indo-Fijian leaders disagreed. They accepted that the rights and privileges of the indigenous community should not be questioned. Minority rights should be protected, but, as A.D. Patel, the Indo-Fijian member of the Legislative Council, put it in 1946, minority communities had 'also to appreciate and realise the fact that you cannot expect or hope for privileges and rights in excess of those enjoyed by the majority'. He continued to argue for a non-racial common roll form of voting, which he had pursued since the late 1920s, and would continue to do throughout his political life. Common roll, he believed, was the only way forward for a racially divided society, the only way 'a common denominator of a political outlook will be developed' (Lal 1997a:29). But he agreed that a common roll could not be introduced unless everyone accepted the idea. His plea fell on deaf, nay, hostile ears.

Lack of consensus about the pace and direction of constitutional change suited the colonial government, placing it in the position of not

having to take a stand or propose initiatives on controversial political issues. Privately, though, its views were deeply divided. Among many there was sympathy for the Fijian position and a marked antipathy for Indo-Fijians. There was a sympathetic understanding of the Fijian predicament, leavened with a good deal of adulation of, and romanticism about, the Fijian way of life (see Roth 1953). Moreover, many felt a moral responsibility for a people who had ceded their islands voluntarily, had pledged total loyalty to the Crown, and had shed blood for the cause of the Empire. The fact that Fijian leaders looked to Britain for guidance, after having reposed complete trust in her institutions and policies, increased the sense of obligation and responsibility correspondingly. The government had little understanding of the cultural and social impulses that drove the Indo-Fijians, for whom colonial rule was not the solution but the cause of Fiji's problems. Remembering the hardship of indenture and acts of petty discrimination their forebears had endured, they saw little of value but much to criticise in colonial rule. And they were not averse to airing their grievances outside the colony and seeking external alliances for their cause, much to the irritation of colonial officials.

There was an Indian problem, many agreed, but it could just as easily have been labelled a 'Fijian problem'. As Governor Grantham told London in 1946, 'apart from the relative growth in population, it might be better termed the Fijian problem, since it is rather a question of raising the Fijian so that he is able to hold his own with the Indian in the modern world, than holding back the Indian so that he does not outstrip the more easy-going Fijian' (Colonial Office document 83/252, cited in Lal 1997b). Fijian interests should be protected, the Commissioner of Labour told the Legislative Council in 1946, but the Fijians had 'reciprocal obligations to the other races in this colony to recognise their economic and political aspirations and facilitate their attainment'. The Europeans and Indo-Fijians had made their contribution to the colony 'and they are entitled to be admitted into full membership of the colonial family'. Yes, there were divisions and distinctions, but the 'interests of the three races are not as so many independent threads, but strands which are interwoven into one economic fabric which are interwoven into one economic fabric; and each strand is essential to the strength of the whole' (Colonial Office document 83/252, cited in Lal 1997b). To those who invoked real or imagined promises to the Fijian people, the governor replied candidly

[t]he obligation of the government to the Fijians can be stated comprehensively in a few sentences; we must preserve all that is good of their culture, but not outworn customs and ways of life; we must give them the opportunities and the means to expand that culture; we must protect them from exploitation and disease; and

otherwise so govern and lead these people as ultimately to achieve their full integration into the political and economic life of a composite society comprising all the races of the colony (Legislative Council Debate, July 1946).

In the 1950s, questions that had been shelved or brushed aside began to resurface with the appointment of Sir Ronald Garvey as governor. Garvey, an old hand in the Pacific, was independent-minded, self-confident and acutely aware of the local realities. He wanted to move the constitutional train along because he was convinced that

[f]airly steady progress is being made [towards common citizenship]. Both colour and social barriers are being broken down and the desirability and, indeed, inevitability of unity is taking shape. It is a policy which I constantly preach myself and it is having its imperceptible effect throughout the whole community (Colonial Office document 1039/9).⁶

In 1954, Garvey asked the Great Council of Chiefs to consider directly electing three of their five representatives to the Legislative Council to give the Fijians an experience of electoral politics. He told the chiefs that the ‘chiefly system on which so much depends should march with the times and should not ignore—for too long—the modern trend of democracy’. To those who invoked the Deed of Cession in support of gradualism and permanent paramountcy of Fijian interests, Garvey responded with characteristic but unprecedented bluntness. He said in 1957

[s]urely the intention of this Deed, acknowledged and accepted by chiefs who were parties to it, was that Fiji should be developed so as to take a significant place in the affairs of the world but that, in the process, the rights and interests of the Fijian people should be respected. To read into the Deed more than that, to suggest, for instance, that the rights and interests of the Fijians should predominate over everything else, does no service either to the Fijian people or to their country. The view, for the Fijians, would mean complete protection and no self-respecting individual race wants that because, ultimately, it means that those subject to it will end up as museum pieces. The Indians are equally eligible to have their interests respected. By their work and enterprise, the Indians in Fiji have made a great contribution to the development and prosperity of their country, and to the welfare of its people. They are an essential part of the community and it is unrealistic to suppose that they are not or to imagine that the position of Fijians in the world today would benefit by their absence (*Fiji Times*, 15 October 1957).

Governor Garvey approached the Colonial Office in 1956 with fresh constitutional proposals. His ultimate goal was common Fijian citizenship, he said. Perhaps his most radical proposal was a ‘multiracial bench’ of four members, one each from the three main racial groups and one to

represent ‘other races’, such as Chinese and other Pacific Islanders, all of them elected from a colony-wide constituency. This was the first time that such a proposal had been made. But Garvey was not supported by his more cautious, conservative officers who argued that the concept of a multiracial bench would be opposed by the Europeans and Fijians who would see the proposal as ‘the thin end of the wedge’ driving to a common roll, and paving the way for reforms far too radical for the colony to bear. Furthermore, would not members not elected by their own group be seen as the puppets of those who elected them? Garvey was undaunted, saying that ‘if we are aiming at a growth of a consciousness of Fijian citizenship overbidding differences of race and religion, I think it has considerable merit’ (Garvey to Sir Thomas Lloyd, 11 February 1956, in Colonial Office document 1036/10).⁷ Maintaining the *status quo* was no solution to Fiji’s political problems.

Garvey’s proposal was discussed by the old colonial hands in London—the ‘back room boys’, Garvey called them derisively—who raised all the usual arguments about the need for Whitehall to ‘keep a firm grip of the initiative’, and act ‘just in advance of pressure, but only just’ (Colonial Office document 1036/10, file 33). The racial factor could not be discounted lightly. ‘It is true that constitutional advance does not wait upon a country’s demand, but the circumstances of Fiji are rather special and to go too fast would...play into the hands of the Indians’ (Colonial Office document 1036/10, file 77). ‘If there is no pressure for a change, we should be the last to stimulate it’ (Colonial Office document 1036/10, file 77), was the advice of one colonial officer. Predictably Garvey’s motive was questioned. Was he actuated by the desire to end his term of office by ‘some significant advance’? The Secretary of State replied to Garvey’s proposals on 20 March 1956

[i]t seems very unwise to do anything to encourage it [constitutional reform] to grow more quickly unless we have some fairly clear idea where we are going. In some respects Fiji is a very difficult proposition from the point of view of constitutional advance. We are all, very naturally, inclined to think of such advance in terms of British institutions, leading in the direction of an elected assembly, universal adult suffrage, the party system, the vesting of executive power in unofficial Ministers and so forth. Yet we are learning by experience elsewhere that the traditional British pattern, however suitable for places of a certain size, is difficult to work out in small territories, even where there is a homogenous and relatively well advanced population; it is still more difficult to apply in such a place as Fiji, where race means more than party, and where a dilemma is created by the numerical preponderance of the Indians on the one hand and our obligations to the Fijians on the other. It may

well be that what we ought to aim at in Fiji is some form of constitution different from the traditional pattern. In this connection you may like to look at the enclosed document about another of our problem areas—Mauritius—not because the ideas which are being tried out there are necessarily all applicable...but as an illustration of the fact that new ways are being sought to establish forms of democracy and of representative institutions in places where the conditions favourable to the ‘Westminster model’ do not exist (Sir Thomas Lloyd to Garvey, 20 March 1956, in Colonial Office document 1036/10).

Garvey was disappointed but not surprised. The fears of the floodgates were, in truth, groundless, he said. In taking the initiative, he reminded the Colonial Office, he was ‘not playing with a scorpion’s tale’ (Garvey to Sir John Macpherson, 14 October 1956, in Colonial Office document 1036/10, file 33). His modest proposals would have resulted in ‘some quickening of interest in a direction where we are failing to make progress even though we are far better equipped than many who have raced ahead of us’. If Fiji were to wait for integration to take place at the local government level, before proceeding to any constitutional change, ‘we shall have to wait a long time for progress in that direction’. When recommending the appointment of a commissioner to advise on constitutional matters, Garvey said he was not thinking of anyone entirely unfamiliar with Fiji. He had in mind Sir Arthur Richards, now Lord Milverton, a widely respected former governor, who had, with Sukuna, engineered the creation of the Native Land Trust Board.

By the late 1950s, Fiji hardly resembled the place it had been at the beginning of the decade. The working class, increasing in size and visibility, had begun to organise. A series of lightning strikes in the 1950s, culminating in the December 1959 riots, shook Fiji. A crippling strike in the sugar industry was in prospect, after a peaceful interlude of nearly two decades. The population was increasing rapidly and becoming better informed about events in Fiji and overseas, thanks to a thriving print media and the advent of the radio. Fijian soldiers were returning to Fiji after four years of service in the Malayan jungles, where they had gone to fight the Chinese communist insurgency. Two major commissions of enquiry were under way, one by geographer O.H.K. Spate into the economic and social problems facing the Fijian people (Spate 1959), and another by Sir Alan Burns into the natural resources and population trends in the colony (Burns et al. 1960), both recommending a fundamental change of direction.

The government could no longer afford to stall or stonewall. In his budget address to the Legislative Council in 1960, the new governor, Sir

Kenneth Maddocks, tested the waters by suggesting the need for constitutional reform, hoping that the next election (in 1963) might be held under a new Letters Patent (Letter from Maddocks to H.P. Hall, 17 January 1961, in Colonial Office document 1036/612). The aim was to pave the way for a ministerial system of government—initially to be called the Member System—under which unofficial members of the Legislative Council would be invited to undertake supervisory roles for government departments, contribute to policy formulation and oversee its implementation, all under the principle of collective, cabinet-type responsibility. The proposal was intended to be the first step towards full internal self-government.

The government's constitutional proposals were debated during the April 1961 sitting of the Legislative Council, the motion introduced by the Acting Colonial Secretary. His tone is almost pleading, begging European and Fijian members to have an open mind on reform. For the first time, the government was taking the lead, somewhat along the lines Garvey had envisaged in the 1950s. The Colonial Secretary asked the members to 'try and establish for ourselves a long term objective'. The winds of decolonisation were moving closer to the Pacific. Samoa was on the verge of independence and Fiji could not afford to be indifferent. 'I know it would be nice to consider Fiji in a vacuum and isolated and do as we wish, but unfortunately we cannot'. He continued

... we are part of the world and there are forces moving which, whether we like it or not—and I know many of us do not like it—are going to have a profound influence on us and on our future. We need to consider these forces; what they are and what steps are necessary to meet and mould them to our ends. We want to do it in our own unhurried time. We do not want to wait till the forces are built up against us and we have to do things as a matter of urgency. Let us think ahead, see what is coming, be ready for it and do all that we have to do in our own time, and by our own choosing...do not let us forget the forces outside. It is no good forgetting them; they are there and they are real (Legislative Council Debate, April 1961).

By 'forces out there', the government meant the pressure from the United Nations' Committee on Decolonisation, which watched developments in Fiji closely, much to the irritation of the colonial government as well as Fijians and Europeans.

During the same legislative council debate, the Colonial Secretary responded to those who maintained that the majority of the people were satisfied with the *status quo*. He is worth quoting at length.

Almost everything starts with a minority. Minorities have a way of growing, and when minorities have a popular idea, any government that ignores such a minority does so at its peril. A minority can be likened to a small stream. It is there, something quite small and water is soft. It can be used for many purposes. If you dam the stream the waters build up behind the dam so you build a bigger dam, but one day you cannot go on and the burst comes. We do not want a burst here. What we want is to look together into the future and be sure that this stream of ideas, this minority perhaps, this thing called democracy is not dammed up or held back but is guided to our purpose. We want no burst dam (Legislative Council Debate, April 1961).

Unsurprisingly, the Indo-Fijian members supported the motion while European members opposed it. But what mattered more now than ever before was the reaction of the Fijian leaders. As in the past, Fijian opinion was not solidly against change. Although the majority opposed the motion, they did so for differing reasons. Among those who remained unconvinced of the government's policy was Ratu Kamisese Mara, the ascendant Fijian political leader and Fiji's first prime minister. The government's policy was ill-conceived and ill-timed, he said, because it ignored the spirit and implications of the Deed of Cession and the special place of the Fijian people in their own country. The chiefs had ceded Fiji 'to be part and parcel of the United Kingdom', in the same way that the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man were integral parts of the United Kingdom. That special relationship was recognised in the title Fijians used to refer to the Queen: *Radi ni Viti kei Peretania*, the Queen of Fiji and of Great Britain. Ratu Mara urged caution and advised a gradualist approach. Constitutional development should follow, not precede, social and economic integration. Ratu Penaia Ganilau another high chief and future governor general and president of Fiji, agreed—no constitution, no matter how good, would work unless 'we have a common background of accepted principles'.

The government listened politely, knowing that it had no alternative but to take the lead, but also aware that it must avoid embarrassing the Fijian members. It sought to allay their fears without compromising the principle of constitutional reform. The government denied that its proposals detracted from the promises of the Deed of Cession, and assured the Fijian leaders that it would entrench provisions safeguarding the native ownership of land as well as others that touched on customary matters. To the argument that social and economic integration should precede political reform, the government argued that 'unity does not have to grow from the bottom. In fact, when there are present

communities speaking different languages, having different religions, living mostly in a different economy and having different customs', unity 'can spread downwards'. Suva was not doing anything that London itself had not adopted as official policy. The Colonial Secretary reminded the Legislative Council that as early as 1943, the United Kingdom had pledged itself to 'guide Colonial people along the road to self-government within the British Empire', adding that 'it is no part of our policy to confer political advances which are unjustified by circumstances or to grant self-government to those who are not yet trained in its use'. For Whitehall, though, the latter qualification had out-lived its usefulness.

In 1963, Fiji got a new Letters Patent that provided for an enlarged Legislative Council, consisting of 19 official and 18 unofficial members (see Meller and Anthony 1968). The three main communities had six members each—the principle of parity was preserved—four elected from racial rolls and two nominated by the governor. Property qualification for voters was abolished, and for the first time, a universal franchise was extended to the Fijians. The following year, the membership system was introduced. The issue after 1963 was not if self-government and independence would come to Fiji, but rather the terms and conditions upon which they would be acceptable to its various ethnic communities.

By the mid 1960s, the political landscape of Fiji had altered dramatically. Fijian fears, alluded to above, had intensified. The industrial disputes of 1959 in Suva and in the sugar industry in 1960, aroused, or, rather, reinforced, the threat of Indo-Fijian domination. The calls for reform in the Fijian system of administration, for traditional structures to be loosened to enable greater personal enterprise among those Fijians who wanted it, for the natural resources of the country to be used in an economic way for the benefit of the country as a whole, for the system of Fijian Administration, which had kept the indigenous community isolated from the mainstream, to be liberalised, startled a people used to gentle counselling, flattery and effusive praise for their traditional way of life. Their leaders expressed their anger, and London listened. 'I see no future in the Burns recommendation that the Fijian administration should be wound up as soon as possible', wrote Julian Amery, the Parliamentary Under-secretary of State for the Colonies, in 1960. 'The Fijians are determined to resist any move in this direction. They realise that whatever its defects the tribal system does provide a leadership capable of defending the Fijian communal interest against what they regard as the Indian threat. Without their chiefs they would be leaderless' (Amery, 'Report on Fiji', in Colonial Office document 1036/612).

Still, Fijian leaders realised that they could not go on resisting whatever constitutional proposals the government presented. And so the Fijian Affairs Board, the executive arm of the Great Council of Chiefs, presented their views in a document that subsequently came to be known as the 'Wakaya Letter'.⁸ In it, they stated their preconditions for constitutional reform. Addressed to Nigel Fisher, the Parliamentary Under-secretary of State for the Colonies, the letter reminded the Crown of the special significance of the Deed of Cession for the Fijians. It was the Fijian view that 'the possibility of severance of this link with the Crown—a link forged in a spirit of mutual trust and goodwill—should never be contemplated' (cited in Lal 1992:189). Before any further constitutional changes were considered, the letter stated, the terms of the relationship, which they mistakenly likened to the relationship between Britain and the Channel Islands, should be clarified and codified. The letter went on

...there would have to be a precise restatement of the guarantee on Fijian land ownership. We visualise that the native land trust legislation should not be changed or added to without the prior consent of the sovereign and the agreement of the Council of Chiefs. We also stand by the expressed desire of the high chiefs in the preamble to the deed of cession that Fiji should be a Christian state and that therefore no constitutional or administrative changes should take place that would deviate from that intention. The provision of the Fijian affairs ordinance that all legislation affecting Fijian rights and interests should be referred to the Fijian Affairs Board or, on the recommendation of the board, to the Council of Chiefs, should be retained and likewise the governor's direction to the Public Service Commission to work towards a balance of the races in the civil service (cited in Lal 1992:189).

If these concerns were addressed, the letter concluded, the Fijian chiefs would consider contemplating further constitutional changes.

The letter was a powerful negotiating tool, designed to extract the maximum concession from Suva and London. The Colonial Office was sympathetic to Fijian concerns but firm about the need not to ignore the interests and concerns of the non-indigenous communities. The government in Suva privately assured the Fijian leaders that the special position of the indigenous community would be safeguarded, and not placed under 'the heels of an immigrant community', in the words of Governor Derek Jakeway, who was himself, in the mid 1960s, active behind the scenes helping the Fijians to organise politically.

Europeans, used to a privileged position, felt threatened about their place in any future constitutional arrangement. The Suva riots, multiracial in character and overtly anti-European in intent, had shaken them as

never before. Alone, they knew, they stood little chance of maintaining their disproportionate representation in the Legislative Council; and they had few friends in places where it really mattered, such as Whitehall. Hence, they sought closer alignment with the Fijian leadership. Understandably, it was an alliance of mutual convenience. The Europeans needed the political protection the Fijians could provide, and the Fijians, appreciating the Europeans' vulnerability, knew they could count on European support against the Indo-Fijians. This alliance of interest against the threat of a perceived common enemy would last the rest of the decade and, indeed, well into independence. It was formally institutionalised in the Fijian Association-backed Alliance Party that emerged in early 1966.

The Indo-Fijian scene was energised by the return to the Legislative Council, after the absence of more than a decade, of A.D. Patel. Patel, Indian-born but a Fiji resident since 1928, was a leader of unequalled intellectual brilliance—a Gandhian at heart, a fierce and fearless critic of colonial rule and an untiring advocate of common roll (see Lal 1997a). He united the usually fractious Indo-Fijian community and formed Fiji's first political party, the Federation, in 1963. Two ideas lay at the heart of Patel's political vision. One was independence, or at least a large measure of internal self-government, eventually leading to independence. If Samoa and the Cook Islands, small, vulnerable and resource-poor, could become independent, why not Fiji, he argued? Independence was a matter of time, Patel believed, not if but when it came, and he wanted Fiji to be prepared for it.

The other idea was common roll. He had been its advocate from the beginning. Communal roll, which Fijians and Europeans wanted, would be ruinous for the country.

Of all the people, Indians are bitterly opposed to communal representation because they have seen its painful result in the course of time. It may not be very serious now, but as time goes on, once people get used to the idea of racial separation, racial attitudes harden and people start thinking in racial terms and racial interests which leads not to one nation but, in the course of political developments, it leads to claims of several nations (A.D. Patel, cited in Lal 1997a:189).

'Communal roll', he continued, 'symbolised divided loyalties, and inhibited the formation of secular parties, with success in politics depending on reflecting communal interests and prejudices. Compromise will be rendered difficult and relative party strength may be frozen for long periods because a party can grow only with an increase in the size

of the community upon which it is based'. On the other hand, common roll would 'encourage the citizens to organise political parties along national lines and in the long run compel everyone else to think in terms of his country rather than a particular race, community or religion'. It was 'only through making one nation out of Fiji that we can achieve the sort of future we want for everybody' (Lal 1997:192).

The passion with which Patel pursued the idea was reciprocated by the passion with which its opponents—which included all Fijian and European leaders—rejected it. The system of communal representation was well established in Fiji; it had worked well, they argued; a system of guaranteed racial representation produced no fears of any one group dominating others; it realistically accepted the differences of culture, language, custom and religion. These two positions illustrate the two contrasting, even diametrically opposed, visions of Fiji; and they have continued to haunt Fiji's subsequent political history. Indeed, in many ways, they lie at the heart of the political problems besetting Fiji today.

In July 1965, Whitehall convened a constitutional conference, and invited the elected representatives of the three communities to London.⁹ All the established positions were expressed, with Europeans and Fijians agreeing only to limited internal self-government and the Indo-Fijian delegation hoping for a final blow to colonial rule in Fiji. Important advances were made. The Legislative Council was expanded to include 36 members: 14 Fijians (9 elected on communal roll, 3 on multiracial cross-voting and 2 nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs); 12 Indo-Fijians (9 communal and 3 cross-voting); and 10 Europeans (7 communal and 3 cross-voting). The system of cross-voting was seen as a limited concession to common roll in which multiracial electorates voted for seats reserved for candidates of different races. The Fijian and the European delegation were delighted with the outcome, and for good reason: the Europeans' privileged position was maintained, and the Fijians had, for the first time, got two additional seats. Fijian-European solidarity was consolidated.

The Indo-Fijians were disappointed. They had lost parity with the Fijians (see Lal 1992). The communal roll had been maintained, their plea for at least partial introduction of common roll falling on deaf ears. And the Indo-Fijian community was now more isolated than ever, electorally segregated from the other communities. The Fijian roll, for instance, was expanded to include all the other Pacific islanders and the European roll opened up to accommodate the Chinese. Why should the Chinese be on the European roll when they had culturally less in common with Europeans than the Indo-Fijians, Patel asked, but to no avail.

He accused the Colonial Office of not playing a fair mediating role at the conference (preoccupied as it was at the time with the crisis in Aden), by not persuading the Fijians and Europeans sufficiently enough to accept at least partial common roll by effectively capitulating to combined European and Fijian pressure. I am presently investigating the thinking of the Colonial Office, so can only provide a tentative assessment of the subject, but my overwhelming impression is that London had a deep sympathy for the Fijian people and was concerned not to let them end up in a secondary position in any future political arrangement. Their rhetorical advocacy of Westminster democracy was secondary to their sensitivity to Fijian feelings. London also had a prudent appreciation of its dependence on Fijian security forces to maintain law and order.

Nor did everyone in London share the vision of Fiji as a cohesive multiracial nation, although most hoped for at least some movement in favour of non-racial politics. Julian Amery reported confidentially to the Colonial Office in 1960 that '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' (Colonial Office document 1036/11). Understandably he did not add that London itself was partly responsible for this unfortunate state of affairs. It was 'impracticable to think in terms of a single Fijian nation or of a common roll at any rate for the foreseeable future', he advised. The concept of a 'single multiracial community as the goal towards which Fijians and Indians alike should strive' was illusory, he added. 'The Fijians will no longer accept this; and the more we lay the emphasis on multiracialism, the more suspicious they will become that we plan to sell them out to the Indians'. Indeed, Amery recommended setting up a separate system of administration for Indo-Fijians, as a counterpart to the separate administration for the Fijians. In view of this, a non-racial vision for Fiji was doomed from the start.

In September 1966, fifteen months after the constitutional conference, Fiji went through another election, for the first time on party lines: the Indo-Fijian-based Federation Party and the Fijian Association-backed, nominally multiracial Alliance Party launched in 1966. Both parties won in their constituencies, the Alliance winning two-thirds of the Fijian communal votes and the Federation a similar percentage among the Indo-Fijians. After the elections, Ratu Mara became the Chief Minister. The 1965 constitution had produced the result both Suva and London wanted, and it seemed there was no urgent reason to review the constitution that the Federation Party had accepted under protest. The new government

jettisoned the bipartisan approach of the past. Patel feared that unless the constitution was reviewed, the entire Indo-Fijian community would be consigned to the wilderness of frustrated and possibly endless opposition (Lal 1997a). And so, on 1 September 1967, the Federation Party walked out of the Legislative Council in the middle of an Alliance attack on the motion it had introduced rejecting the constitution and demanding a new one that was based on more democratic principles.

The ensuing by-election was fought in an intense atmosphere of great bitterness and tension (see Anthony 1969; Norton 2004). When the Federation Party won all the Indo-Fijian communal seats, and with increased majorities, too, many nationalist Fijians threatened violence, bringing the country to the edge of a crisis. But cooler heads prevailed and emotions subsided. Nonetheless, the message was clear—the 1965 racially unbalanced constitution would have to be re-examined, and the wishes of the Federation Party could not be ignored. Nor, on the other hand, could Fijian views be discounted. The battle lines were clearly drawn. Apprehending the gravity of the situation, Governor Jakeway urged Mara and Patel to resume dialogue. They did in August 1969, as representatives of the two parties met in Suva under the chairmanship of Ratu Edward Cakobau for a series of confidential discussions to identify areas of agreement and disagreement between them.¹⁰ In an atmosphere marked by cordiality, the leaders talked frankly and freely about their concerns and fears, stating their views about the constitution and possible ways out of the current impasse. A.D. Patel, who died a month after attending the first meeting, pressed his case for common roll and immediate full independence. After his death, Patel was succeeded by Siddiq Koya, also a lawyer by training, who proved less doctrinally or ideologically committed to common roll, and who was more conciliatory and pragmatic. Mara's relations with Koya were more cordial, as they never had been with Patel. Mara had the measure of Koya, where he feared Patel's guile.¹¹ Influenced by a wider and deeper knowledge of history, particularly of the Indian subcontinent, raised at the dawn of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against the British, philosophically committed to the idea of a non-racial society to the point of stubbornness, Patel was not one to give in easily. Koya, on the other hand, accepted the reality on the ground and sought to work pragmatically within its parameters and constraints where as his predecessor had sought to change them, to alter the terms of the debate.

In the confidential discussions between August 1969 and March 1970, common ground was reached on many issues. To allay Fijian fears about

their rights, the Federation Party proposed an upper house, the Senate, where the nominees of the Great Council of Chiefs would have the power to veto any legislation that affected specific Fijian interests. It also proposed to go into independence without election to avoid the acrimony that an election campaign would inevitably entail, because it felt that Ratu Mara, then widely popular, was the best leader to be at the helm to effect a smooth transition to independence, and because the Federation Party itself was diffident about the broad acceptability of its own leadership.¹² In truth, they acknowledged that all the power was on the other side, and that they would have to accept the role of opposition for a long time into the future. There was also the hope that by making concessions and adopting a moderate stance, space might be created for racial reconciliation and harmony and for genuine multiracial politics to emerge.¹³

On one issue, though—the composition of the legislature and the method of election—the two parties disagreed. The Federation Party presented its case for a common roll, though without the conviction or authority of the past. Predictably, the Alliance opposed the idea, while promising an open mind on common roll as a long-term objective. Both parties decided to defer the issue to the impending constitutional conference in London, with the Federation agreeing that, in the event of an impasse, it would accept a formula ‘approved and settled by the British Government’. Lord Shepherd, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, who went to Fiji to witness first hand the progress and the authenticity of the local negotiations, was clearly delighted by the Federation’s concessions—as, of course, was the Alliance Party. He insisted that the consensus be formally recorded. The consensus was that ‘if no agreement was reached and circumstances remained as at present, it would be necessary that the constitutional instruments for independence should reflect, subject to any formal changes arising from independence, the provisions of the existing constitution’ (Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 32/571). That is, the same constitution that the Federation Party had rejected in 1965 as ‘undemocratic, unjust and iniquitous’. In their quest for an orderly transition to independence, the party leaders had sacrificed their long-held principles for political expediency. As they saw it at the time, a smooth transition to independence was their primary aim, with the hope that things might change for the better in the future. They did not.

The penultimate conference paving the way for Fiji’s independence was held in London in April 1970. Words spoken at the opening session

at Marlborough House by both parties alluded to racial harmony, nation-building, common future, gratitude to the United Kingdom and close links to the Crown, trust, mutual understanding and goodwill.¹⁴ The political turbulence that had accompanied the enactment of the 1965 constitution seemed a distant memory. Shepherd queried the over-representation of the Europeans, which Mara justified as a reflection of their contribution to the economy. He did not say—did not need to say—that the Europeans invariably voted with the Fijians, and that their disproportionate numbers in parliament was a guarantee of Fijian political dominance.

On common roll, Mara was adamant: it was nothing but a ruse for Indian domination of Fiji. Fijians would never accept it. ‘These fears are like the devil. Many people can prove that there is no devil, yet they are fearful of devils’ (Transcript of pre-London talks in Suva:94). The Federation Party presented its case for common roll, and expected Lord Shepherd to impress on the Alliance the need to make at least some token gesture towards accepting it. The Alliance refused and Shepherd proposed that acceptance of common roll be a long-term objective. NFP Secretary Karam Ramrakha objected, but officials in London and Suva both knew where party leader Koya stood. For him, it was a long-term objective too. To break the impasse, Shepherd resurrected the idea of a Royal Commission to look into the method of election after independence. Mara and Koya endorsed the proposal. In 1975, a commission was appointed with Sir Harry Street as chairman, and recommended moving away from communal roll to a system of proportional representation.¹⁵ But by then the Alliance was firmly in control, and refused even to debate the report in parliament. National Federation Party cried foul, but one is left with the impression that its leaders, with a few exceptions, did not mind the Alliance’s about-face on its Marlborough House commitment. The Indo-Fijian population growth was slowing down, and many saw guaranteed racial representation to be in the community’s long-term interest.

The final constitution was in its most fundamental aspects an extension of the principles and values that had underpinned the 1966 constitution. It preserved the *status quo*. Fiji was to have a bicameral legislature with an appointed Upper House (Senate) and a fully elected Lower House (House of Representatives) of 52 seats, with 22 each reserved for Fijians and Indo-Fijians and 8 for the general electors (Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese and others). Of the 22 seats reserved for the Fijians and Indo-Fijians, 12 were to be contested on communal (racial) rolls and the

remaining 10 on national (cross-voting) seats. This meant that candidates themselves were required to be Fijians, Indo-Fijians and general electors, but they were all elected by registered voters. In the House of Representatives, then, Fijians and Indo-Fijians had parity. The general electors' privileged position was also preserved: though they comprised only 4 per cent of the population, they had 15.4 per cent of the seats, compared to Fijians and Indo-Fijians who had 42.3 per cent of the seats each. General elector over-representation was accepted, indeed advocated, by the Fijian leaders, who knew from experience that the general electors would support them, as they had invariably done in the past. In the 22-member Senate, the principle of Fijian paramountcy was explicitly recognised by giving the 8 nominees of the Great Council of Chiefs the power of veto over legislation specifically affecting Fijian interests and privileges.

The independence constitution, then, represented continuity with Fiji's racially divided past. It was based on the assumption that 'race', or ethnicity, was, and would long remain, the most important determinant of political behaviour of the people and that Fijians would control political power if they remained united and voted solidly as a racial group. But Fiji was changing rapidly. New forces of modernity and globalisation were altering the fundamental social and political structures of society, reducing the relevance of race in everyday life. The gulf between the public culture constructed on the pillars of communalism and the realities of everyday living was growing.

Two days before Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970, Sir Robert Foster penned his last despatch as governor of Fiji. In it, he tried to capture the mood of the moment, the sometimes-tumultuous events which had led to it, and embroiled it in conflict and tension, and offered his prognosis on what the future held for the young nation. 'Seldom can a country have prepared for independence with such aplomb', he told London. The diverse people of Fiji 'do not yet think of themselves as a nation' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 32/606), and Julian Amery's words about the differences between the two communities, written a decade ago, still retained some salience. Foster commented on developments which had facilitated the smooth transition to independence: the sobering effects of the 1968 by-elections, and the conciliatory posture of Siddiq Koya and his warm relations with Mara.

The future looked reasonably bright. But in his despatch was the suggestion of dark clouds on the horizon. The land problem—not ownership but leasing arrangements—remained as intractable as ever.

Time had been bought by setting up a committee to examine amendments to the Landlord and Tenant Ordinance. ‘But a solution to the land problem is no nearer. I doubt whether the problem will ever be solved without far more radical changes in the system of land tenure than Fijians have hitherto been prepared to contemplate’ (Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 32/606). The second major problem, unresolved at the conference—shelved, to be confronted after independence—was the electoral system. ‘A calm search for a just solution to the problem of representation has in the past proved virtually impossible; feelings ran far too deep for that. One is therefore bound to regret that in effect a time bomb will lie buried under the new constitution, and to pray that it may be defused before exploding. The two parties have however publicly committed themselves to an act of faith that must give reasonable ground for hope’ (Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 32/606).

Prescient words. There was reasonable hope—all that could be hoped for—as Fiji took its first steps into its independent future.

Notes

- 1 Since this is a largely well-known story, detailed bibliographical reference is not necessary. For a general overview, see Lal 1992.
- 2 For a discussion of land issues, see Lloyd 1982 and Kamikamica 1997.
- 3 Pointing out the gulf between official rhetoric and the realities on the ground has been the hallmark of most revisionist historiography on Fiji.
- 4 See, for instance, the Fiji Education Commission’s report (Government of Fiji 1969) for an analysis of reasons for Fijians’ poor academic performance.
- 5 For a succinct summary of this, see Ali 1980.
- 6 A fuller treatment of Garvey’s views is forthcoming in the Fiji volume in the British Documents on the End of Empire series, scheduled for publication in 2006.
- 7 Full details in Lal 1997b.
- 8 Reproduced in Lal 1992:189.
- 9 See House of Commons cmd Paper 1783/1965. Also Davidson 1966. More recent analyses are in Norton 2002, 2004.
- 10 A copy of the confidential proceedings is in my possession.
- 11 For Mara’s assessment, see Mara 1997.
- 12 See Foreign and Commonwealth Office file 32/405.
- 13 I base this on correspondence with Karam Ramrakha, a key player in the NFP at the time of the negotiations.
- 14 Proceedings in FCO 32/572.
- 15 ‘Report of a Royal commission appointed for the purpose of considering and making recommendations as to the most appropriate method of electing members to, and representing the people of Fiji in, the House of Representatives’ (Parliamentary Paper 24/1975).