13. Diplomacy

A nation’s main contact with the outside world is often through diplomatic missions.

Diplomacy is the conduct of relations between one state with another by peaceful means, but the real purpose of having a diplomatic mission in a country is often vague. When the British Empire was at its height, its motivation for establishing relations with foreign countries was strategic, primarily to extend trade. It’s debatable whether that has changed. Britain was the first to set up a consulate in Fiji in 1874 and it has had a base here ever since.

Other countries with full diplomatic missions in Fiji include Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, France, Japan, China, India, Malaysia, Korea, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu. Many other countries, such as Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Mexico, Pakistan, Canada, Chile, Nauru, the Philippines, Italy, Belgium and Sri Lanka, have honorary Consuls.

In 1989, I was asked if I would take up the appointment as Honorary Consul for Germany. An increasing number of German tourists were coming to Fiji and getting into one form of trouble or another. I seemed to spend a great deal of my time in my early years as Consul helping those who had their passports stolen or who had been jailed for being in possession of small amounts of marijuana.

But I also administered a small-scale aid scheme. My task was to identify projects costing no more than $15,000 that would in some way improve the quality of life of people, particularly in the rural areas. Such projects included water supply, school libraries, kindergartens, agricultural projects, equipment for training and facilities for the handicapped or underprivileged. I genuinely felt that such schemes, which directly touched the lives of the people, engendered greater good for donor countries than multi-million dollar projects.

People responded to this aid in different ways. An urban school may accept my cheque with gratitude but little ceremony, whereas Fijians in a remote village where I had done a drainage scheme would use the occasion for the completion of the project as an opportunity for a celebration. There would be a full, elaborate ceremony, presentation of gifts and a huge feast. I tried to discourage such extravagance as it all cost money that they did not often have. However, life in a village can often be dull and mundane and they welcomed the chance to celebrate, have a feast and some fun. The least I could do was to redistribute the gifts of food and mats that were presented to me as the honoured guest. This was customary and often expected.
While this type of consular duty was very satisfying, there were others that gave no pleasure.

Fiji law provided that should a person be found to possess any quantity of marijuana, no matter how small, there was a mandatory custodial sentence of 30 days jail. Many young German tourists, unaware of our laws, were apprehended and sentenced. I was often the only contact with their relatives back in Germany and had the unpleasant task of explaining their predicament. It was a stupid law as it costs the Fiji taxpayer money to keep people in jail and it has now been changed. For the young German, often with a good job back home, it was a rude awakening to find himself locked in a cell for 30 days. I visited them and tried to make life easier but was really of little comfort.

There were also deaths. I remember the case of a young German who went for an ocean swim at a resort the first evening he arrived. He got caught in a current, was swept out to sea and never seen again. Telling his parents back in Germany was agonising. It was worse that the father insisted on flying to Fiji to see exactly where his son died. The poor man was completely distraught and I could do little more than sit with him and tell him about Fiji and how dangerous the ocean can be if you do not understand it. The outstanding natural beauty of the resort grounds, the beach and the ocean, at peace at sunset, had no impact on him. All he could see was a black hole as he wallowed in abject misery.

In my role as Consul I saw a great deal more of people in the main diplomatic missions and United Nations agencies. They were of course feted by our own government and local organisations who hoped to get aid from them, and I suppose this tended to give some of them an exaggerated opinion of their own importance. They had all kinds of diplomatic privileges, such as duty-free booze and cars, and this aggravated locals. One that really annoyed me was how the drivers with DC plate cars took advantage of parking in no parking areas.

However, I should not give the wrong impression about diplomats. Some very fine men and women represented their countries with charm and dignity. The Indians always had very suave and dignified high commissioners. Once during my early years in the Sugar Industry, a newly appointed Indian High Commissioner sought to pay respects to my Chairman, Sir Charles Marsack. After the meeting he passed my door on his way out. He stopped and very politely put his leg across the doorway and said, ‘I just wanted to say that I had called upon you.’ I supposed this would enable him to legitimately say in his report that he had visited the Chairman and the Secretary of the Sugar Board.
The diplomats often reflected the characteristics of their nationalities: the Americans were often brash; the Japanese imperial; the Chinese inscrutable; the New Zealanders parochial; the British aloof; the Australians down to earth; the Koreans difficult to understand; the Malaysians rather carefree.

One of my favourites was a big, heavily built Australian High Commissioner, Colin McDonald. He was a straight talking man who called a spade a spade and to hell with the diplomatic niceties. Because of these characteristics, he got on well with the then Fiji Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who seemed to enjoy the company of big men like himself. Colin typified the Australian persona. I remember once, years after he had left Fiji, my secretary came into my office and said someone was here to see me. She gave me a look that I knew said, ‘I don’t approve of his appearance.’ I was surprised to see that it was Colin, with ruffled hair, a faded floral bula shirt, short pants, and flip flops on his feet. ‘Just passing through,’ he commented in a jovial manner. ‘I have time off from my formal obligations and wanted to say g’day.’

One of the main events in the calendar of all missions is the celebration of the national day, which provides an opportunity to have a large function and in some way reflect the character of the nation they represent. On one occasion, Colin decided to celebrate Australia Day, which is in January, one of the hottest months in Fiji, by holding a function at one of the local cinemas where Crocodile Dundee was showing. Invited guests were served pies and tinnies throughout the evening. The cinema was not air-conditioned and it was one of the hottest nights for many years. This had two effects. Firstly, we all sweltered in the oppressive heat, and secondly, the guests tried to alleviate the heat by drinking more tinnies. It turned into a very boisterous occasion. Colin also arranged for Lulu (the auctioneer mentioned earlier) to raise money for charity. Lulu was a laugh at any time but when he was very full of good Australian beer he was incorrigible. The auction got completely out of hand and Colin had to ask Lulu to leave.

The British celebrated events such as the Queen’s Birthday in a more formal way by having the Governor General, Prime Minister and other dignitaries present. You signed the book as you entered and there were appropriate toasts and singing of anthems.

A feature of the Japanese celebrations of the Emperor’s Birthday was the magnificent spread of traditional food. There was always a keen expectation of receiving an invitation to this function.

The high commissions and embassies were staffed by a varied collection of people, many of whom made very useful contributions during their term in Fiji. The first woman Australian Trade Commissioner to Fiji was Clare McMahon. Her
appointment occurred at the time when women were breaking down the walls of male dominance and one of those organisations to succumb to the pressure was Rotary. Since its establishment in 1905, it had firmly resisted the admittance of women, but the headquarters in Chicago finally buckled and I had the pleasure of proposing Clare to become the first woman Rotarian in Fiji. Despite her heavy schedule she contributed a great deal of service to the community.

Some foreign missions had a rather easy time in Fiji and their staff could spend time at their favourite recreations. Fiji was heaven for Asian diplomats who enjoyed golf. It was a game they could not afford in their home countries, but in Suva the course was only ten minutes from their place of work and the annual subscription fees of only $300 compared favourably to tens of thousands of dollars in Japan.

Another of my favourite high commissioners was Karim Masuki from Malaysia. He loved golf so much that he constructed a pitch, put a course in his garden and invited his friends to lunch parties and golf. His other passion was game fishing and he found time to join the Fiji competitions as well as those in New Zealand and Hawaii. He was a man who loved life and though he was a Muslim, he enjoyed a drink. He did much to foster good relations between Fiji and Malaysia.

An American Ambassador who did more to generate good relations between Fiji and the USA than any before or after was Mrs Evelyn Teegan. She and her husband, Dick, had a real passion for their task. Dick was a retiree who threw himself into a number of activities, while Evie did her job as Ambassador. He resurrected the YMCA, which was virtually defunct, by indentifying funds from overseas, starting training and vocational programmers and personally driving the affairs of the organisation. He was also a dynamic force in Rotary.

Evie exuded charm and bonhomie that won her countless friends. She was a successful businesswoman, hence her selection by the Republican President as an ambassador, and there was a tough side to her. She played her diplomatic cards with great skill, which won her respect.

Jacque and I and our group of friends became close friends of Dick and Evie and had many enjoyable functions together. Just before she departed, the incumbent British High Commissioner was due to end his term in Fiji. He was a rather staid and reserved man, but with whom we had also become friendly. We decided to play a ruse on him. Evie invited him to what was supposed to be a formal function at her embassy to meet a visiting sheikh from Saudi Arabia who was being accompanied by his son and the American Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. This person was, in fact, an official in the US Embassy in Fiji; the son was a friend of ours. I was nominated to be the sheikh. The son and I were dressed
in the fine raiment of an Arabian sheikh, with false beards and moustaches. We waited in the lounge of the American Embassy and, in due course, the British Ambassador arrived and Evie presented my son and me. When she said ‘British Ambassador,’ I angrily turned to my son and castigated him for putting me in a position of having to be polite to an Englishman who he knew I hated. I spoke in very loud and angry Hindi, as I didn’t know any Arabic, and the Ambassador didn’t know either. The poor Ambassador was flabbergasted at my outburst and simply stood before me not knowing what to do as I ranted and raved and vigorously pointed my finger at him. Evie and Dick tried their best to keep a straight face and only when the Ambassador turned to her, his face ashen, and asked what was going on, did she burst into laughter and explained the ruse. The poor fellow collapsed into a chair and I really thought he would have a heart attack. We then took off our makeup and revealed who we were, but it took a long while for him to realise that his diplomatic career had not suddenly floundered on the last day of work.

Another woman diplomat who made her mark in Fiji was the Australian High Commissioner, career diplomat Susan Boyd. It would have been a very hard road for any woman to make her way up through the Australian diplomatic service, particularly if you had been born in India to English parents. But Susan, an attractive, effervescent personality, had all the right characteristics. She was extremely smart, committed to her tasks, and could tell a risqué joke better than most men. She worked a cocktail party, the workplace for most diplomats, with great skill, but often shocked ‘proper’ diplomats when she came out with a bar room story in mixed company. She had served as High Commissioner in Vietnam before coming to Fiji and was on her way back there on 19th May 2000 to open an Australian aid bridge that had been commissioned during her term. She was at Sydney Airport when she got word of the coup by Speight and boarded the next plane back to Fiji. Susan worked extremely hard and skillfully during that difficult period to keep her people in the Australian Government informed about developments and advise them on appropriate actions. Her efforts contributed greatly towards maintaining relationships between the two countries.

She was, of course, at risk during this period and the Australian Government sent four burly Australian police officers to Fiji to protect her. Before she ever left the compound in Suva, two officers would go and check out the route of her car and destination to ensure that it would be safe. Only when they were satisfied did Susan and the other two officers venture forth. It was a trying time for her and she often sought to escape from the pressure.

Jacque and I and our daughter Sandra had discovered that we had a lot in common with Susan and we became close friends. She apparently felt she could let her hair down with us and we would not betray any of the confidences that she shared with us. Sometimes Susan would phone and say, ‘I have to get
out of this bloody place. Can I come up for a drink?’ Of course she was always welcome. Two of her bodyguards would accordingly be dispatched to check out the security of our home. When they were satisfied that all was well, they would contact their two colleagues, who would bring Susan to our house. On one occasion the first two came up, checked out everything, and then reversed out of our drive into a drain. When their efforts to get out were in vain, I offered to use my four-wheel drive to pull them out. They were most grateful but swore me to secrecy. ‘If our mates find out what happened to us we will never hear the end of it,’ they pleaded. I respected their wish but had to tell Susan, who had a great laugh.

The Bainimarama government greatly extended Fiji’s diplomatic contacts by establishing missions in many countries. Fiji had been a member of the United Nations for many decades and its peacekeepers have served with distinction in many trouble spots. But during the second decade of the 21st century, Fiji’s Representative to the United Nations, Peter Thompson, began to play a more prominent role as chair of various bodies such as United Nations Development Programme. Bainimarama himself was chair of the influential Group of 77 and China, as well as the International Sugar Organisation.

So people in many different parts of the world began taking notice of Fiji and its representatives and decided that perhaps Fiji wasn’t just a country of coups.