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# Serious things begin to happen

I had been counting down the days to the two months the New Zealanders had said they would need to get the necessary approvals to give me some money. So, as soon as the calendar clicked over, I took the option that I thought would be the most polite way of saying to them, 'Well, fellas, what's happening?' by phoning their consul general in Noumea. He was well aware of my anxiety. He said he would call Wellington immediately and get back to me, hopefully in a day or two.

Later that afternoon, he called: 'Approval to contribute US$120,000 per year for the first three years has been signed. You will receive written confirmation in the next few days'. The impact of this contribution was monumental on me in the first instance, but I was certain it would also have an impact on the other donors. While the amount may have been less than ideal, its value was immense.

A year and a half of apprehension had been worth it, judging by how elated I felt. I quickly called Hope and asked her to put a bottle of Champagne in the fridge. I then called Duncan Waugh to thank him. He sounded almost as pleased as I was. It was too late to call Jim Joseph in his office, but not too late to call him at home, which I did. I also called Bill Fisher. I then sat back and planned my strategy for appraising the other 'donors'. The moment of truth for each of them was at hand. They had all stated that they would not be the first, and they had lived up to that promise, but their desire not to let it go ahead without them was definite, or at least I hoped it was. In reality, each of them had been worried that if they made a definite commitment and the others did not, things could get messy. The SPC

clearly did not want to be a participant in the programme, so there was no parent organisation to help broker a solution if one or more of the potential donors pulled out. I progressively got the impression that there had been discussions among at least some of the five SPC member donors, basically agreeing that it was a grand, but parentless, project. The only person to negotiate with was Dr Kearney, and he didn't have the sort of money we are talking about. That they would all like to see the Skipjack Programme go ahead was agreed, but the impasse had been 'We will follow you'. The great news was that 'you' had just put their hand up: New Zealand was showing the way – just follow us!

Now that at least one contribution was on the way, I needed to make sure the banking arrangements were in order. So, I paid the commission's finance officer, Ivan Boyd, a visit. I wanted to be certain he and I agreed on how the money that would be coming in was to be managed. I started to tell him about the donors' agreement to keep the money totally independent of the SPC and, in fact, to give it to me. Ivan interrupted me; he was already aware of this. He had been asked by the representative of one of the donors at the last SPC conference if such an arrangement would work. He advised that he thought this arrangement to be the logical way to proceed; the programme was, after all, an 'extra-budgetary' one. He assured me that this was the commission's first ever. So, there was a need to create the appropriate processes and to keep the budgets separate. I told him of the bank account I had opened in Sydney and that as soon as money started arriving, I would get him authorisation to access it for programme expenditure. He thought these arrangements were the right way to go and offered to help as soon as necessary. I then rang my contact at the Commonwealth Bank and informed him that the first of the money was on its way.

The next day, I began formally ringing the other donors; I had no money left to go see them, as the Rockefeller Foundation had espoused. Australia's aid people had given me the impression that if any other donor showed some initiative, they were likely to make a quick and favourable decision; so, I started with them.

I had had numerous face-to-face discussions with the senior AusAID officer with whom I spoke previously, and I was confident we had a good relationship. In any case, the enthusiasm that was evident as soon as I told him that New Zealand had signed left me in no doubt that he was happy I had rung. He then told me that approval to commit to the programme had been signed a few weeks before, but enactment of it was subject to two

conditions: the first being that there were contributions from other donors; the second was that the actual amount of Australia's contribution remains negotiable, to some degree. The amount of $200,000 had been discussed as indicative of a fair contribution. Australia accepted the quantum of this contribution, but noted that the original discussion occurred over a year ago and exchange rates were fluctuating considerably; some negotiation might be necessary. A possible increase in Australia's contribution was on the table. In the signed commitment, the relevant AusAID representative had been authorised to negotiate the final amount with the programme coordinator, taking account of exchange rates and the contributions from other donors. I could not have dreamed of more.

At the time of the original suggestion of $200,000, the Australian dollar was worth US$1.37. As the Australian dollar was continuing to depreciate against the US dollar, Australia was prepared to increase its contribution. Noting also that the only contribution confirmed to date was that of New Zealand of $120,000, the total of all contributions was likely to be less than an average of $200,000. Taking account of these two factors, Australia was prepared to increase its contribution to AU$250,000 per year for the first three years. At that time, AU$250,000 equated to US$275,000. 'I love a sunburnt country' ('My Country' by Dorothea Mackellar), where once it does rain, it often pours. I loved it an unbelievable amount more than usual on that day. I could now contact the other four donors with the news that New Zealand and Australia had both committed for a combined total of approximately $400,000 per year. Two of the six shares were paid up.

I then called Jim Joseph again. He had already been on the phone with his contacts in the State Department, and the fact that New Zealand had started the process of contributing was enough for them. They said I should receive something in writing, probably from the US ambassador in Suva, in a week or so.

The UK representative in London was very calm and positive: 'We said we would contribute when others were in, and we will, probably in about a week'.

The local French representative on the SPC said France was a definite starter. He then said, 'off the record', that with the other donors committed, it would be very unwise for France to pull out now. But getting a signed commitment would take about a month; getting agreement between Noumea and Paris had a reputation for not being instantaneous.

The Japanese had always been ready to go, if I had enough money to negotiate a charter agreement. I told my contact in the Japan Fisheries Agency that I now had enough money to guarantee at least the five-month charter they felt was the minimal requirement. I then reminded them of my earlier request for them to identify a suitable vessel for us to begin negotiations over. He agreed to take the necessary action.

Within about two weeks, all but the French contributions had been confirmed. Money was flowing in. I had not officially informed the SPC of the confirmation of good fortune, so now I thought it appropriate to tell the secretary general the good news. He was visibly pleased and congratulated me. He then said, 'Now that we have the money, we can start the programme'. I found his reference to 'we' having the money a little strange, particularly in view of the executive's insistence that the money being raised must be outside the core budget. The money was in a separate bank account under my name. Perhaps, by 'we', he was just being friendly towards me? After all, his finance officer, Ivan Boyd, had already been aware that the money was going to be coming to me. So, it was likely just a slip on his part.

That night, Hope and I went out to dinner to celebrate what was effectively the start of the Skipjack Programme. Or, more correctly, the successful completion of phase one: the fundraising. I had quite a bit of administration before me, but I couldn't wait to get out on the boat and tag some skipjack. Tomorrow I would begin drawing up duty statements and advertisements for staff. I could also put myself on the payroll. I now had a job with regular pay – or so I thought.

This text is taken from *Pacific Skipjack: The Remarkable Story Behind the World's Biggest Tuna Fishery*, by Bob Kearney, published 2026 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/PS.2026.10