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An attempted coup, or two

A couple of days later, for some reason I remember it was mid-morning on a Thursday (my memory was probably strong because it turned out to be a rather momentous day), I had a visit to my office from the commission's director of programmes. This was completely unexpected and was, as far as I was aware, the first time he had ever been in Wing 7, which was where my office was located. He knocked on my door and then walked in. He sat down in the chair in front of my desk. I remember verbatim what he then said:

> Congratulations on raising the money for the Skipjack Programme. A million dollars a year is a lot of money. Now that we have that money, we are going to advertise the position of Programme Coordinator. With that amount of money, we believe we will be able to attract somebody really good to run the Programme. Of course, you can apply, if you want.

I was speechless. In shock. Then I decided I was not going to respond in haste. When I didn't, he waited about half a minute, then got up and left. My immediate thoughts were twofold: firstly, no wonder the commission is broke, and apparently broken, with this guy in charge of the work program; secondly, there would be no point in me applying to the SPC for the job because they had already determined that I was not 'somebody really good'. With all this money behind them, they thought they could easily find somebody better.

I then walked out of my office and over the road to the beautiful white sandy Anse Vata beach. A good stroll along the beach helped clear my head, or at least settle my nerves a little. After an hour or so, I decided that it would be best to let the donors deal with this. I was very confident they

would be on my side. They had not been prepared to give the money to the commission, so I thought they would not be happy to have them 'steal' it. I strongly suspected that when they heard what the commission was proposing, they would not be amused. So, I returned to my office and called the Australian consul general, Bill Fisher, intending to call the New Zealand consul general, Dick Grant, immediately after. I would then contact the other donors as necessary.

Bill was like me, speechless, but he is a diplomat, so he did not wish to give away too much. I told him that I was seeking support from the donors to the programme, starting with him as the representative of Australia. I was then going to contact the other donors as necessary. Bill thought it a good idea to get all donors involved, if necessary, and he would be happy to lead off. But before he did, he would like to know what I thought were the main issues he should take up with the SPC Executive. He wanted to make sure that his case was as good as he could make it. It was not an issue on which we could afford to lose. He said that once he had put together his case and confirmed the support of Dr Grant, he would visit the secretary general and the director of programmes.

I said that there were quite a few key issues, including these three: the first was whether removing me from the position of programme coordinator was a sound decision; the second was whether the director of programmes has the authority to take this action: he certainly does not have access to the programme's money to pay anybody else, and as I am the sole executor of the account, I think he will have a very difficult time getting access to the money; and the third is the director of programmes' assertion that they will be 'able to attract somebody really good' (that is, better than me) to fill the position. Yes, my pride in what I had achieved so far with the Skipjack Programme had been severely challenged. I tried to put this aside and concentrate on the facts of where we were with the programme and how we had got there. What does the duty statement for the position look like? How do my qualifications for the position stack up against somebody who is 'really good' for the job?

I explained to Bill that in all of my discussions with potential donors, a key assumption had been that I would run the programme – if I could get it funded. On the occasions of the Law of the Sea meetings (see Chapter 8), several donors actually raised the issue of whether I would be prepared to sign a commitment to stay for at least two years once the money had been secured. In other words, my remaining to run the programme was a key

factor in their commitment. I had assured the donors that this was irrelevant, as I was not trying to raise the money because I liked fundraising. I am a scientist, and I raised the money because I wanted to carry out this big project and see the benefits it would bring to the countries and territories of the region. I had assumed that I would stay for at least four years. Why would I want to leave now when this fantastically exciting science project that I conceived and promoted was about to become a reality? It simply had never occurred to me that I could be sacked from a job that I had created and had obtained the funding for. The only measures of my performance to date were my success with convincing the fisheries officers of the region that this programme was what they needed, and then convincing the donors to fund it.

I would be most surprised if the donor governments collectively were happy with my removal, to be replaced by an, as yet, unknown person who is 'really good'. What exactly is that person going to be not only good at, but better at than I am? What are the selection criteria for the position of program coordinator, and how do my qualifications against those criteria stack up?

1. *Fundraising*. The donors are in the process of awarding me an extra-budgetary grant of approximately $1 million a year for at least three years after only one and a half years of single-handed fundraising. In the 30 years of the commission, not one of its employees, or the commission collectively, has been able to attract a single extra-budgetary grant, even for $1,000.
2. *Experience with designing and running a Skipjack Survey and Assessment Program*. The program I designed from scratch and ran for four and a half years in Papua New Guinea was an appropriately scaled model of the current programme for the broader area of the South Pacific. It has been extremely successful and remains the only currently operational skipjack tagging programme of this kind in the world. Nobody else has run anything like it. I developed, described, directed and then published new methods for tagging skipjack and surveying skipjack and baitfish resources. The current Skipjack Programme was my idea, and I designed it: I wrote the original program proposal and all subsequent amendments.
3. *Extensive experience with managing surveys of baitfish resources of the South Pacific, in particular the selection and design of specialist gear to catch different species of bait in different habitats and environments*.

Again, my Papua New Guinea experience is unique. More than 150 species of tropical baitfish were identified, with 15 of them previously unidentified in the area in which they were captured. Several new techniques for bait capture and handling were developed. Again, these have been described and published.

4. *High-level experience with skipjack research results and the interpretation of the relevance of these to the management of tuna fisheries*. I have published numerous appraisals of skipjack populations and stock structure. It is what I do!
5. *Proven knowledge of the major ocean management issues in the South Pacific and the implications of the changes occurring in the Law of the Sea*. I have published numerous papers, including those specifically used as the primary discussion documents for regional meetings of heads of governments on the Law of the Sea and regional fisheries policies. Two of these papers have been republished by invitation, unedited, in international law journals, even though they were not originally written for a legal audience.

There is a huge and fundamental flaw in the director of programmes' stated assumption 'Now that *we* [emphasis added] have the money', this being exactly the same expression the secretary general had used just a few days earlier when I advised him that I now had confirmation that I had secured the necessary funding for the programme to begin. Both gentlemen need to be reminded that the money is not being given to them; it is being given specifically to Dr Kearney: I am the designated sole signatory on the accounts and the sole executive officer of the Skipjack Programme. It was the donors' idea to make me the recipient of the funds and the chief executive of the programme. The donors were keeping the programme's funding totally independent of the commission. They clearly have doubts about the SPC's ability to manage a project such as this. It is not an accident that these same donors have not awarded the SPC another extra-budgetary project in the history of the commission, even though the commission currently has 21 such projects on their 'wish list'.

If I were to leave the SPC, the money and the programme would likely go with me. I was certain that the University of the South Pacific in Suva would be overjoyed at being asked to host a $1 million a year project at no expense, as would most universities in Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia.

I would also suggest that not only the donors but also the fisheries officers of the region would not be pleased to see me removed as programme coordinator. Indeed, at least some of the leaders of the countries and territories of the region might also not agree that I should be replaced. My work with them on the Law of the Sea negotiations had made me quite a few friends in high places.

I left Bill in no doubt about how upset I was by what I considered an incredibly unfair turn of events. I felt, even then, that I may have gone over the top in my response to Bill's request for me to explain what was wrong, but I think I was still in shock. I have never had a professional experience affect me as this one had.

About 4 pm that afternoon, I was going to the main SPC building to pick up some files when I saw Bill Fisher and Dick Grant walking down the corridor towards the secretary general's office. I quietly turned around and went back to my office.

Bill called me that evening to tell me not to worry. He and the New Zealand consul general had had a good chat with the relevant officers of the commission. I could anticipate an apology early next week. He never did tell me exactly what he said to them, except for the fact that Australia would not be pleased if I were removed. New Zealand, and almost certainly the other donors, would also not be impressed.

On the following Tuesday, the director of programmes again came to my office. An apology was clearly beyond him. Instead, he stated that he and the secretary general had reconsidered the running of the Skipjack Programme, and they would not be advertising my position after all. I could continue with implementing the programme. How magnanimous of him! As with his first message, I did not say a word; the 'thank you' he was waiting for did not eventuate. He quickly and quietly left my office.

I must admit that the whole incident of being 'sacked' by somebody who did not have the authority to do so and having to seek external assistance to be reinstated shattered what enjoyment there had been in working at the SPC. I had to make every effort to prevent my annoyance with the current executive from diminishing the passion I had always had for getting the Skipjack Programme fully operational throughout the whole area of the SPC. The excellent results that continued to come in from the tagging in

Papua New Guinea had made me more confident than ever that the big experiment would work. I now had the money; all I had to do next was get 100,000 tags out across the whole area of the SPC in the backs of skipjack.

Another Takeover Attempt

Despite the good relations I had established with the commission's finance officer, my problems with getting between other people and a pool of money were not all over. About two weeks after the incident with the director of programmes, the secretary general's secretary asked me to come to the secretary general's office. The secretary general handed me a letter from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). I do not remember the exact detail, but believe it began with:

> Congratulations to the Commission and Dr Kearney for raising the money for the Skipjack Programme. FAO would now like to appoint a senior scientist to take up the position of director of the programme.

No justification for such a strategy was given, but it appeared to be based on the assumption that, since one version of the programme proposal was written by Dr Kearney as an FAO consultant, FAO somehow owned the programme.

The secretary general seemed very much on side with my opinion that this was a valueless 'try-on'. He asked me to draft a reply for his signature. Thinking that he would likely water down what I wrote, I did not hold back. In essence, we told FAO that they had not at any stage indicated a desire to have their staff involved in finding donors for the programme, and they had provided no tangible assistance, of which we were aware, with having the programme funded. The SPC had therefore moved on and begun employing staff, including the continuation of Dr Kearney running the programme.

Fortunately, neither Macu Salato nor I had seen the letter the previous secretary general had sent to the Rockefeller Foundation claiming, falsely, that I had written the original programme proposal at the request of FAO (see Chapter 5). I did write an updated version of the programme proposal while working at FAO in Rome, but it was my idea to do so. And all we did was modify some bits of the original proposal I had written.

I think the secretary general had learnt from the earlier disagreement the director of programmes had dragged him into with donor governments. He signed and sent the letter I had drafted without changing a word.

A few weeks later, we received an apologetic response from FAO. No further discussions were entered. I did, however, re-establish my friendship with John Gulland. It flourished until John's death more than 10 years later.

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