The Future of Pacific Regionalism: A New Zealand Perspective on an Unfinished Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

My task is to look ahead to the future of regionalism in the Pacific from a New Zealand perspective. In doing so I draw on the past – and particularly the major review of New Zealand Pacific policy that I was involved in nearly 15 years ago. This was published with the title, “Towards a Pacific Island Community”. The title remains apt. While there has been movement in the direction of greater regional togetherness, there still is a long way to go in “redefining the Pacific” (to use the title of this conference) towards establishing a Pacific community. This is why I have subtitled my paper “an unfinished agenda”. Most of the items on that agenda were raised in that 1990 report.

The issues I have chosen to focus on in this paper initially relate to the changing mixture of external influences on Pacific Island regionalism. While the focus of this conference is on the Pacific Islands – I prefer the term Oceania – developments in the central Pacific will be influenced by the actions and attitudes of the large powers that make up the Pacific rim.

I will highlight the following three areas.
• New Zealand’s involvement. I consider New Zealand to be a Pacific island state which should not be regarded as an outside power. I will seek to make the case for the Pacific island region should assume a more important place in New Zealand foreign policy.

• Australian policy towards the region. I will explore the signs that in the future there is likely to be a growing divergence between the New Zealand and Australian approaches to Oceania.

• Asian involvement. I will briefly discuss the implications for New Zealand (and Australia) of the Pacific Island states increasing tendency to turn north to Asia for assistance and understanding.

I will then to turn to the four key subjects which I consider to be the most important items on the unfinished agenda for Pacific regionalism

- a single regional organisation
- a Pacific parliament
- sub- regionalism
- a regional peace keeping force.

I conclude with some observations on the viability of small island states and the vision of a Pacific union.
TIME FRAME

I have chosen to consider the future of Pacific regionalism within three time frames: short, medium and long term. The short term covers the next five years and is chosen to assess the changes bought about as a result of Greg Urwin’s recent appointment as Secretary General of the Pacific Island Forum. He has been appointed for a single three year term, but I would not rule out a second term given the enormous task ahead of him in developing and implementing a “Pacific plan” for greater Pacific cooperation and integration.

The year 2020 is my “medium term” reference point. This is around 15 years away – the same number of years that have elapsed since the 1990 “Towards a Pacific Island Community “ report I mentioned earlier. I believe this was the last time this School focussed on the Pacific Island region. The report’s recommendations are reproduced in the book of the papers delivered to the School. 2020 may provide a reference point for a future Otago Foreign Policy School to again visit the topic of Pacific regionalism – although I hope we do not have to wait that long. 2020 would enable a critical appraisal to be undertaken of predictions and assessments made at this conference – including my own. What struck me as I looked back on the 1990 report was how little had changed and how
valid most of the recommendations remained. I suspect the next 15 years will see a much greater degree of change than the last. The long term covers the twenty-first century, and could see the radical transformation of the region.

NEW ZEALAND’S INVOLVEMENT

Why is the Pacific relationship special for New Zealand, and how is it likely to change in the future? A starting point is the reality of geography. The Pacific is where New Zealand is in the world. The Pacific island states form New Zealand’s front – not back – yard. How New Zealand responds to the challenges and opportunities of the region will help mould our neighbourhood and influence the way others from outside the region view New Zealand. In this part of the world New Zealand is not a small state but a major player. What New Zealand does – or fails to do - in the Pacific makes a difference. This cannot be said of any other part of the globe.

This can be illustrated by the contrasting New Zealand response to the internal strife in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. In the mid 1990s New Zealand took the lead in ending the decade long civil war in Bougainville. Several hundred Bougainvillians took part in peace talks in Christchurch, and New Zealand provided the initial peace monitors. But
in 2000 pleas to New Zealand and Australia for assistance from the democratically elected government of the Solomon Islands were ignored. It was argued that there was no peace to keep, and there was concern about the lack of an “exit” strategy. The situation continued to deteriorate, the coup took place, and when New Zealand and Australia finally responded in 2003 they faced a much worse situation than in 2000. The failure to act – the only time a request for security assistance from a friendly neighbouring state has been turned down - proved costly. By 2003 a much larger force of over 2000 was required. Three years earlier a force of just 200 may have been sufficient.

Cultural links provide a further reason for giving greater attention to our region. These ties bind New Zealand into the largest part of the Pacific – the great Polynesian triangle which stretches from Aotearoa to Hawaii in the North and across to Rapanui (or Chile’s Easter Island) in the East. In the years ahead the Polynesian nature of New Zealand population will increase rapidly. At present around 16% of the population identify on census forms as Maori and a further 6% as Pacific Polynesian. This means that nearly a quarter of New Zealand’s population identifies with Polynesia. By 2051 New Zealand’s Pacific population - excluding Maori - is predicted to increase from the 2001 figure of 247,000 to 599,000 or
13% of the total population. When Maori is included nearly 50% of the population will be “Polynesian”.

Constitutional links provide a further reason for New Zealand to give priority to the Pacific. The Cook Islands and Niue remain in free association with New Zealand. This bestows New Zealand citizenship, and many more Cook Islanders and Niueans now live in New Zealand than in their home islands. New Zealand also retains formal responsibility for defence although in practice it follows the wishes of the self-governing states. Tokelau is a self administering New Zealand territory and has been reluctant to move to freely associated status. New Zealand has a treaty of friendship with Samoa – its only formal treaty with the region.

All this makes up a case for New Zealand to do more in the region and for foreign policy to take on a more of a Polynesian character. The Pacific is where our foreign policy begins. From a Pacific base it extends a global reach as New Zealand seeks to protect and expand its trading interests.

In practice New Zealand’s relationship with the Pacific Island region has stalled. New Zealand now takes an increasingly distant second place to
Australia in the region. Claims of a special New Zealand expertise in Pacific affairs is becoming more difficult to substantiate.

No new diplomatic posts have been opened since the 1990 review. New Zealand is still not represented in a third of the Forum states, (Tuvalu, Nauru, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands) or in the important territories of Hawaii or French Polynesia. Tuvalu, the smallest fully independent Polynesian state, has no resident embassy or High Commission. The vast Micronesian region is covered from a small New Zealand diplomatic post in Kiribati.

There has been a commitment to make the Pacific the focus of New Zealand aid, but the total aid allocation scarcely moved in the recent budget. New Zealand is now a relatively small player in terms of its ODA contributions to the Pacific, falling increasingly behind Australia, the EU, Japan and France. The 2002 review of New Zealand aid made a compelling case to focus on poverty alleviation in the Pacific Island region. If implemented this would switch the priority from Polynesia to Melanesia in the Pacific region. What is needed is a substantial increase in aid that can maintain assistance to Polynesia while giving greater attention to Melanesia.
Ultimately the degree of government attention will be influenced by wider public attitudes. There is a need for the New Zealand news media to pay greater attention to Pacific affairs. Newspaper and television coverage is sporadic. Radio New Zealand International does an excellent job – but mostly for a foreign, not domestic audience. National Radio’s Pacific news is excellent but its main week day time slots of 6.10 a.m. and Saturday 5 p.m. limits its audience. New Zealand universities also need to pay greater attention to Pacific developments. I was concerned to learn at a recent seminar on Pacific studies that I was apparently the only New Zealand political scientist with a continuing university appointment specialising in Pacific politics. I hope that this is not the case and, if it is, that it will soon be changed.

On the positive side New Zealand Prime Ministers have, when compared with their Australian counterparts, a good attendance record at the Pacific Island Forum. Recent Foreign Ministers from both the major political parties have taken the region seriously. National’s Don McKinnon played a major role in settling the Bougainville conflict. He also began the process, continued by Labour’s Phil Goff, of taking an annual visit to the region accompanied by a number of MPs, and representations from both government and non-government organisations with Pacific interests. The establishment with government assistance of the Pacific Cooperation
Foundation, which helped sponsor this conference, is a particularly welcome development.

I look forward over the next 15 years to a strengthening of New Zealand ties with Oceania. This could, I believe, be achieved in part by drawing on the wealth of talent within the New Zealand Pacific community.

AUSTRALIA: OVERLAPPING OR DIVERGENT INTERESTS

Australia’s present and future links with Oceania are well covered in the papers presented to this conference by the Australian contributors. My observation is that while Australian and New Zealand interests clearly overlap in Oceania, they are not identical, and are likely to diverge rather than come together in the years ahead. These differences will reflect on attitudes towards regionalism.

In the past the Pacific Island region has not been as important to Australia as it has been to New Zealand. Australia has not readily identified as a Pacific “island” state. It felt more comfortable in the company of the “middle” and larger states that make up the powers of the Pacific rim.

Australian foreign and defence policy looked first and foremost to its near North to Asia. It then casts a wary eye westward across the Indian Ocean
and especially at the nuclear capability of India and Pakistan. Only then did Australia turn its attention to the Pacific – with the focus on the Northern Pacific, particularly China and the Koreas, rather than the Pacific island region.

This all changed for Melanesia with the Bali bombing of October 2002, which in effect was Australia’s 9/11. It highlighted concerns about terrorism and instability in neighbouring Indonesia. It also raised new and threatening concerns about the so-called “arc of instability” which fused together security fears about Melanesia and Asia.

This level of threat perception highlights the key trans-Tasman difference regarding Pacific affairs. Australia feels threatened by its neighbourhood – New Zealand does not. This is why Australia’s defence expenditure on a GDP basis is nearly double that of New Zealand. It also explains differing attitudes to the ANZUS alliance. Australia’s intervention in Melanesian trouble spots is motivated by concerns for its security. For New Zealand the motivation is mainly humanitarian.

These differing motivations give rise to differing styles. New Zealand generally prefers a lighter hand when dealing with Pacific Island states than does Australia. Despite Australian opposition New Zealand insisted
that the Peace Monitoring Force for Bougainville be unarmed. This contrasted with the heavily armed Australian-led military back up provided for the Solomon Island RAMSI intervention force.

What will the next 15 years bring? There are unlikely to be any future Bougainville style New Zealand led interventions in Melanesia. It has been made clear that this is Australia’s sphere of influence. Future New Zealand led initiatives are likely to be restricted to Polynesia. But further RAMSI type interventions, led by Australia, are likely.

LOOKING NORTH

While Australia and New Zealand have been major players in Oceania to date, the future is likely to rest increasingly with more powerful Asian states particularly Japan and China. The trend will be for the Pacific Island states to look to their Asian north rather than south to Australia and New Zealand. There are important implications for Pacific regionalism which will become evident in the next 15 years.

An example of emerging Asian leadership is the PALM summit Japan hosts for all Pacific leaders every three years. (Australia and New Zealand choose to be represented at the Foreign Minister level.) A wide
range of regional issues are discussed. The dominance of the host brings about a very different form of “summit regionalism” than the Forum process – which is driven by the regional secretariat.

China is also increasing its regional profile. China has taken advantage of US preoccupation with Middle Eastern concerns to extend its influence in the Pacific. It now has more diplomats (but not posts) in the Pacific island region than any other state. China engages in its own form of “summit regionalism” through a vigorous programme of “visit” diplomacy – the bringing to Beijing of Pacific Island leaders who receive flattering attention. The result has been that a number of Pacific leaders have had greater contact with the governing Chinese elite than their US counterparts.

The tendency to look north to Asia will be increased if Australia and New Zealand (and other Western aid donors) judge the success of their Pacific policies according to the remaking of island states in the image of Western style “good governance.” Attaching governance conditions to aid is the right of aid donors and can be justified for promoting human rights and combating corruption. But if pushed too far will increase the tendency of Pacific states to utilised other options of moving closer to
countries such as China which do not share the same level of concern regarding democratic governance.

UNFINISHED AGENDA

Attention will now be turned to four issues which, in my view, the region needs to address: a single regional organisation, a Pacific parliament, sub regionalism, and regional peacekeeping.

A SINGLE REGIONAL ORGANISATION

The question arises of whether the region needs or can afford two major organisations, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), and a number of smaller organisations. Over the years there have been periodic calls for the establishment of a Single Regional organisation (SRO) with the Pacific island Forum taking the lead role. This has been, predictively, resisted by the smaller regional organisations that would lose their autonomy through such a move. Cooperation to date has been facilitated by the Council of Regional Organisations (CROP) which brings together the nine principal regional organisations. The eminent persons group (EPG) which recently reviewed the Pacific Island Forum could see “no practical value” in a SRO, although it did hint that the Secretary General should make more of his position as chair of CROP. It also called for a more effective use of
resources committed to regionalism. In my view this is unlikely to be achieved without a SRO.

The time is overdue for the PIF to assert regional leadership and for a single regional organisation to be formed. The small dependencies, which are members of the SPC but not the PIF, have understandably opposed such moves in the past. These concerns can be taken care of by providing dependencies – such as New Zealand’s Tokelau, American Samoa, French Polynesia - with associate Forum membership status.

France, whose territory of New Caledonia hosts the SPC, is likely to continue to resist moves to establish a SRO. There may be implications for French aid to the region. But recent political developments in New Caledonia and French Polynesia suggest the winds of change have now at last reached France’s Pacific territories. The SPC belongs to the past colonial area. To be heard the region needs to talk with one clear voice.

The new Forum leadership of Greg Urwin provides a means and appropriate period to achieve a SRO during his three year term as Secretary General. Indeed it provides a litmus test of just how serious the Forum’s political leaders are about the PIF exercising clear regional leadership.
A PACIFIC PARLIAMENT?

It used to be said of Mike Moore, the former New Zealand Prime Minister and WTO Director, that of every twenty ideas he had (and he had plenty) one would be worth pursuing. Such was the case with the book wrote in the 1980s advocating a Pacific parliament.

I support the proposal as, I believe, a gathering of the region’s parliamentarians would help foster a wider Pacific identity. While the parliament would not – at least initially - have law-making powers it could be a valuable source of recommendations and ideas that could assist and guide the Forum. MPs could learn much from discussing common problems and this could assist – and raise the status of – the various national parliaments. Many of the Pacific Island parliaments meet only rarely, and have little impact on the process of government.

While the Pacific Island Forum provides a means for the Prime Ministers to meet and get to know each other, and there are regular ministerial gatherings of, for instance Forum Finance Ministers, there is no forum for the regions peoples’ representatives, the MPs. There are regional meetings of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), and
costs could be contained by convening a Pacific parliament to follow a CPA regional meeting. The Micronesian states of Marshall Islands, FSM and Palau, which are not Commonwealth members, have their own Association of Pacific Island Legislatures. Hopefully it would be prepared to take its turn in hosting a wider regional parliamentary gathering.

A Pacific regional parliament would provide the setting for the much needed debate about what constitutes the essential elements of Pacific democracy. Aid donors have long lamented the stunted growth of the transplanted Western systems. Demeaning labels, such as “failed states”, have been applied, for instance, to the Solomon Islands. The Pacific Island rebuttal - that the “failure” may relate as much to the inappropriateness of the political system as the actions of the local politicians needs to be heard. A Pacific Parliament could debate the relative merits of, for instance, parliamentary and presidential political systems and the on-going relevance of traditional political practices. What is of central importance to parliamentarians is the degree to which the political leaders are held accountable. This can be achieved by both western and traditional means, and a mixture of the two. A case can be made, citing, for-instance, the example of Samoa, that the more traditional systems are also the more stable.
A regional parliament would be a useful initiative for New Zealand to promote. Mike Moore could be asked to sound out regional MPs. It would be a tangible way of demonstrating that New Zealand was keen to have the Pacific voice heard in regional affairs.

**SUB –REGIONALISM**

Pacific states are generally grouped into three cultural sub-divisions – Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. Although these labels date from the colonial era, the terms have been readily adopted by Pacific island governments. Views have differed, however, on the establishment of sub-regional organisations.

A Polynesian federation was proposed in 1880 by the then King of Hawaii, who saw himself as the regional leader. The idea was revived in the 1980s, by Cook Island Premier Sir Tom Davis. It was backed by Gaston Flosse, the then President of Polynesia, the King of Tonga (who saw himself as the leader) and some New Zealand Maori leaders. Samoa was not interested, unless it could have the lead role. New Zealand was lukewarm, with the then Prime Minister David Lange unwilling to provide the necessary funding. The idea lapsed when Davis and Flosse lost power.
In Melanesia a Federation was proposed by some prominent Australians in the 1970s. A Melanesian Spearhead group, was formed in 1987. Fiji joined in 1996 and New Caledonia followed. There have been moves to establish a permanent secretariat.

In Micronesia there is close cooperation between the present and former US territories – both the Freely Associated States (Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands) and the remaining dependencies – Northern Marianas and Guam. Those without an American background – Kiribati and Nauru -are also included in the Council of Micronesian Chief Executives (but not – as yet- the Association of Pacific Island legislatures).

Sub regionalism – or cultural regionalism, has not had a good press. It tends to be dismissed as a colonial hang over, or frowned upon as an expensive impediment to the development of wider regionalism. But the case can also be made that the sub regions may provide useful, and perhaps necessary, stepping stones to more comprehensive regionalism. It has the advantage of being able to build on an internal cultural identity. This contrasts with “pan regional” organisation whose inspiration has generally come from outside powers.
Polynesia has made least progress towards establishing a distinctive identity as a sub-region. My view is that it is time for New Zealand to revisit its past attitude, and support the establishment of a Polynesian community. It is an area where the New Zealand government could encourage the Maori community to take the lead. It could develop into an important part of the more “Polynesian” foreign policy alluded to earlier.

A PACIFIC ISLAND PEACE KEEPING FORCE?

Proposals for a regional peace-keeping force are not new. An early advocate was the former PNG Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan. He took pride in the role PNG forces played in suppressing a rebellion that took place in Vanuatu at the time of independence in 1980. But although Sir Julius chaired the 2004 EPG reviewing the Forum, he did not take the opportunity to revive the proposal. Such a call would have been consistent with the EPG’s recommendation that for the Forum Secretary General be pro-active in the event of a regional crisis. In terms of crisis management such a force would give the Forum teeth.

The idea continues to be supported by Melanesia. A Meeting of the Melanesian Spearhead Group in 2003 agreed to establish a Melanesian peacekeeping force – but has yet to action the approval. It was envisaged
that the force would not be restricted to security duties, but would also respond to natural disasters and help counter trans-national crime.

While in addition to Australia and New Zealand, only PNG, Fiji, and Tonga maintain armed forces, all island states have police forces which could make up a substantial part of a regional security force. The way police and military from around the region have worked together in the Solomon Islands operation demonstrates the proposal’s viability. An earlier example of regional security cooperation was the brief deployment of Pacific forces to Bougainville in 1994. While the force was not able to be deployed because of differences amongst the Bougainville factions, it did demonstrate that such a force could be brought together and deployed.

Some of the objections to a regional force relate to costs which Australia and New Zealand fear they would have to meet. But costs could be contained if existing forces were used rather than establishing and maintaining a standing force. Regular exercises would need to be held in different parts of the region.

The proposal for a regional peacekeeping force was tentatively raised during the 1990 New Zealand policy review, but not pursued largely because of Australian objections. In consultations it was made clear that
Australia would regard a regional multi-national force as having the potential to impinge on its “sovereignty”. This attitude is unlikely to have changed. Australia wishes to remain free to make up its own mind when armed intervention might be called for.

But such objections serve to underline the need for such a force. The alternative is that the lead role will always go to Australia or New Zealand. The ANZACs will become the regional police force with token contributions from Pacific Island states so that it can be called a regional force.

THE VIABILITY OF MICROSTATES

There is an underlying assumption in the arguments of those favouring regionalism that the smaller Pacific microstates are not viable. But why can’t small be beautiful? Is bigger necessarily better?

It can be argued that the evidence from the Pacific is that, with some notable exceptions such as Nauru and Niue, the micro states have made a better fist of independence than a number of the larger states. Most of the region’s strife has been in Melanesia in the relatively large states (by Pacific standards) of Papua New Guinea (population over 5 million), Solomon Islands and Fiji. Most of the very small states i.e. with
populations under 20,000, such as the Cook Islands, Niue, Tuvalu and Palau, have remained politically stable.

Would a region with fewer states be more peaceful and prosperous? This could result from regional integration amongst island states, or the reintegration of “failed” states – such as Niue into New Zealand or Nauru into Australia. Regarding integration, the lesson to date has been that grouping diverse cultures has been a source of conflict, not harmony.

My pick is that the twenty-first century will see more rather than fewer Pacific Island states. Fragmentation is more likely than integration. In the next two or three decades the Pacific Island Forum may grow by around 50% with the addition of East Timor, West Papua, Bougainville, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and perhaps, the states that currently make up the FSM- Pohnpei, Yap, Kosrae and Chuuk. There are not all “micro” states. Bougainville, for instance, has a population of around 200,000 – roughly the same size as Samoa. The number could be greater if the Melanesian states fragment further and more states graduate out of political dependency –such as Wallis and Futuna, and Tokelau.

Will more states mean more instability, conflict and poverty? Possibly, but not necessarily. Indeed the reverse can be argued. Had Bougainville
been allowed its independence in 1975 the bloody civil war of the 1990s could have been avoided. Had Tuvalu not been permitted to separate from Kiribati both would have suffered from ongoing tension, which may have ended in violence.

IS THE GOAL OF THE PACIFIC UNION DESIRABLE OR PRACTICAL?

New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, has identified an E.U. style grouping of nations as a “vision for the Pacific for the twenty-first century”. However, it is important to acknowledge that a Pacific Union is not part of the current regional agenda. The EPG only dropped hints in this direction, and a EU type structure was explicitly ruled out by leading regional figures such as the Prime Minister of Fiji. The EPG called for the region to agree on “a Pacific plan” – a “strategy for deeper, broader regional cooperation”. This will be discussed at the August Forum in Apia.

I do not expect a supra–national European style Pacific union to eventuate in either the short or long term. It is hard to imagine two more different landscapes- one a continent, the other a vast ocean. A basic reality test reveals the islands to be too scattered and lacking the economic and strategic motivation which drove European integration.
Only around 3% of the island’s exports are with other island states. There are no doubt benefits to be gained from freer trade within the region, especially for the larger states. However, calls for Pacific economic and political integration on the European scale will raise suspicions, and be likely to generate opposition rather than support from island states. This will be particularly the case when these calls for regional integration are coming from Australia and New Zealand rather than the Pacific Island states. What is noticeable by its absence is the lack of Pacific Island champions for regional integration.

To push integration too far too fast will be counterproductive and make it difficult to consolidate the benefits of more practical regional cooperation, such as in the areas of transport and managing fish resources. The Pacific way is not to rush. An evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach is most likely to bring results. I suspect the redefinition that features in this School’s title will be a while coming. It will be some time before the question mark can be removed.