Realising political stability
Saturday, 30 August 2008

(This is Sir Peter’s opening address at the two-day conference on Political Parties and Integrity Reform in Honiara this week)

I HAVE been asked to talk on the likely causes and problems of political stability and governance in Solomon Islands and on possible solutions that one might offer within the context of political party reform.

I suppose that as one who led the negotiations regarding our Independence and Constitution, and as someone who has been involved in politics and governance of Solomon Islands in various roles since Independence, I am qualified to make some observation on the topic at hand — most of which are made in hindsight.

Causes/Problems

It goes without saying that political instability and poor governance have plagued our nation since Independence to this day. These, in my personal view, come about as a result of a series of related yet distinct factors including political party related issues; our electoral system; corruption at various levels; corrupt election practices; discrepancies between local cultures and attitudes and modern party politics; inequalities in the political game; personal interests overriding national interests; and the side effects that come with diversity within a nation.

Political parties

In terms of political parties and party politics, I have noted over the years that the function and influence of parties have declined with time and with every new Parliament.

While it is fair to say that the party system was never really strong in Solomon Islands and that party politics has always been very complex, I believe that at the formation of this country and some years into independence, parties meant something at least to early politicians.

Back in those days there was an attempt to vote and take action along party lines. This has however declined with time and in recent years, it is my view that party politics has become too fluid and party loyalty seems now more dependent on personality instead of principle or philosophy. This in turn was (and still is) caused by a number of factors.

These, one might argue, include lack of party discipline, emergence of new but weak parties with no clear philosophy, voters voting along personal relationships rather than party philosophies, politicians allowing personal interests and human frailty to override national responsibilities and inequalities between parties in terms of finance and influence.

Whatever the true causes of the fluidity in our party system, the overall effect, as I see it, is that the importance of political parties in national decision making has indeed been watered down and is yet to be fully appreciated by voters.

As such, it would seem to me that political parties in our context are merely vehicles that politicians use to finance political campaign.

After general elections, these cease to have any significance, relevance or influence to politicians, except during votes at Parliament sittings when politicians fall back on their respective parties during lobbying.

The above observations suggest to me that despite 30 years of political independence, our political party system and politicians are not yet mature enough.

This is obvious when one recalls that in most other countries, party systems and politics developed as conventions and did not have to be engineered by legislation.

Perhaps maturity of political parties and politicians in this country may have turned out differently had two specific areas been dealt with differently during our negotiations for Independence.

These are provision for Motions of No Confidence and entrenched party discipline extending even to the Independent Group.

In hindsight, particularly in view of the fact that in my 7 years as Prime Minister of this country 6 Motions of No Confidence were moved (unsuccessfully) against me, the provision in the Constitution allowing this kind of motion was perhaps too flexible and thus open to abuse, frivolous and vexatious use, corrupt practices and, of course as proven time and again in the last 30 years, political instability and poor governance.

As it currently stands it does not help the stability of the government as it can be used out of political spite at any time, as long as seven clear days notice is given to the Speaker.
The concern here is that every time a Motion of No Confidence is moved against a Prime Minister, the nation is held at ransom in that all activities seem to be ceased while most resource and attention are diverted to the pending showdown in Parliament.

These indeed have serious implications on the normal operations of a government including service delivery.

While the thinking we had during the drafting of our Constitution was to the effect that provision should be made for removal of a Prime Minister other than at the end of Parliament’s life, I must say that political stability in our country would have benefited a lot had we restricted the use of No Confidence Motions.

Similarly, while party discipline was not included in the Constitution due to perhaps a naive hope that the party system would naturally develop and become strengthened with time, it is now clear after 30 years that discipline might need some legislative urging.

On the same basis, I am also of the view maybe at the very beginning, we should have extended party discipline to the Independent Group so that after government is formed, every politician, including those elected as independents, is required to join to a party of his or her choice.

I will return to this point later. Having said that, however, I must add that back during the Independence negotiations, I had approached the Leader of the Independent Group with the proposal for party discipline to be entrenched in the Constitution.

At that time, the Independent Group had the majority and my party was in a coalition with the Group.

Unfortunately for his own reasons, the Leader turned down my proposal. Having witnessed party politics spiralling out of control over the last years, I sometimes think that perhaps I could have pushed a bit harder back then.

Electoral System and elections

Another underlying cause of political instability and poor governance, in my opinion, is our electoral system and its related problems.

It has been identified by a number of academics and practitioners that the First Past the Post system is such that a Member elected to Parliament is sometimes elected by a small percentage of voters where there are many candidates in a particular constituency.

I believe that this system is part of the reason why voters ignore political parties and why candidates try an appeal to voters material desires and relationships instead of political parties.

Our electoral system as it currently stands does not make any room for voting along party philosophies, such as providing an alternative for voting by individual (below the line) or voting by parties (above the line).

Moreover, this system creates a political environment where a Member is elected by a relatively small number of voters with the effect that this Member is then expected to ignore his party’s philosophy and instead look after that core base of voters in terms of their material needs.

Another relevant factor that I see in relation to the electoral system is the proven fact that it is rather conducive, and thus has not prevented, corrupt elections practices such as ballot buying.

Of course the system is not the sole cause of these kinds of practices. However, when the inherent weaknesses of this system is combined with other factors including personal interests, misplaced basis for voting a particular candidate, campaign promises and a weak political party system, the end result in the long run is political instability and poor governance.

In a nutshell, I strongly believe that the electoral system and associated corrupt or unethical practices tends to influence not only the quality and integrity of elected leaders, but also the mentality and expectations of voters before, during and even after general elections. This, even without hard evidence, is clearly a recipe for instability and poor governance.

Corruption

Without pointing any fingers or naming names, it is common knowledge that corruption of different degrees exists at the national level of governance. I do not need to give any examples here.

The media is always full of allegations of corruption. These allegations come from voters, administrators and the civil society.
Whatever justification a politician might raise in defence of a particular action he took in his official capacity, international experts and bodies have reached the conclusion that Solomon Islands ranks amongst some of the most corrupt countries by international standards.

Even if we ignore that, it is my firm believe that appearance matters just as much as action actually taken when it comes to good governance so it is never healthy for a politician or a government to have allegations hanging over their heads or for action to be taken which, while legally or technically safe, gives an unfair, biased, unethical or suspicious appearance. This unfortunately seems to occur in our country too often and has, in my view, resulted in a disconnection between the masses and their elected leaders.

Again, this result has many undesirable side effects on stability and governance given that the relationship between the "governor" and "the governed" do not see eye to eye on many issues.

Poor perception

As I mentioned earlier, having a weak and fluid political party system has partially contributed to political instability and poor governance.

One of the reasons for such weakness and fluidity relates to voter perception of political parties and politics. As long as voters remain ignorant of the real value and usefulness of parties in decision making, politicians will likewise avoid wasting time on campaigning by party philosophies and instead resort to other messages that might be more appealing to voters.

In short, this issue boils down to the attitude or perception of the people towards voting and their representatives. I believe this attitude or perception stems from a number of complex factors. At the forefront of these is the fact that our country is simply too diverse in many respects that candidates' political parties is seen as just another level of division and difference, amongst many others such as cultures, villages, islands, provinces and denominations to name a few.

On the other hand, our traditional communal life styles do not allow for diversity of political parties. As such, from the voter's viewpoint, it does not stand to reason why he or she should vote a candidate just because of his party, which incidentally was established by unknown persons from other islands, instead of voting for a blood relative or at least a fellow tribesman.

These are indeed complex factors that might at times appear contradictory and not quite rational. However, the bottom line is that as long as voters' perception of the party system remain poor, it would remain very difficult for party system reform to have any real impact at all in terms of political stability and good governance.

In sum, I am of the view that political instability and poor governance in Solomon Islands are jointly caused by four key areas namely, the political party system and associated problems, the electoral system and election malpractices, corruption in general and poor voter perception of the party system and the side effects of that.

As such, any likely solutions should, in my opinion, seek to address those four areas in a positive manner.

Possible solutions

I now turn to what I think might be possible solutions to improve political stability and governance in Solomon Islands. Here, I do not propose to come up with "solutions" as I think that would be a bit too ambitious on my part and would also unnecessarily pre-empt the whole idea behind this Conference.

Instead, I will only make some broad comments on the general direction or approach which, in my personal opinion, would contribute to this nation's political stability and good governance in the future.

I will use the four key areas I identified earlier in making these comments. Perhaps I should start with what I see as the general direction or approach.

In view of the four key areas that I believe require reform, I am of the view that any reform aimed at fostering and maintaining political stability and good governance should take a four-pronged approach that is simultaneously addressing the key areas: improve the party system and politics, improve the electoral system and practices, minimise corruption and improve voters' perception of the party system and politics.

I strongly believe that addressing a particular area in isolation of the other three will make very little, if any, practical difference.

Most of the problems I have described earlier are too entrenched in our systems and minds so what is required is a
complete and coordinated overhaul and not a series of legislative changes scattered across the board.

I will attempt now to paint a rough picture of what I mean when I refer to a four-pronged approach.

Political parties and politicians

Let us start with the party system and party politics. Quite obviously, and in line with party system development in other countries, what we need here is a party system that is more stable, meaningful and one which comprises strong parties as well as politically matured politicians.

If we are to achieve these, I suggest we identify specific weaknesses within our party system and address each – even by legislation if necessary – while at the same time work on individual politicians’ maturity.

I have already touched on some of the specific weaknesses of our current party system. There are more and these are well documented.

Addressing these would, in my personal opinion, entail regulation of political parties, their membership and party discipline in general.

This in turn calls for some means of ensuring that politicians refrain from party hopping. This might for instance involve the heavy penalty of a Member losing his or her seat if he or she joins another party after being elected.

Equally, this would also mean restricting any group of independent Members in a similar fashion so that we do not end up with a big group of independent Members without any party philosophy or objectives to guide them.

I also believe that the government should support political parties by creating some sense of opportunity through basic funding of each party, assistance with the administration of each party or the establishment of an election fund. Any other means of supporting individual parties should indeed be welcomed.

On the issue of Motions of No Confidence, I would like to see this mechanism restricted like how it has been done elsewhere. The provision for a grace period within which such a motion cannot be move would perhaps be a good starting point. Whatever other change we might suggest, the aim here should always be to impose restrictions so as to avoid abuse of such motions while balancing that need with the threat of creating a democratic dictatorship.

These are but some of the kinds of reforms that I would like to see made to our party system and party politics. The overarching objective of course should be to encourage and fast track much needed changes.

These kinds of changes may be made by legislation and will require constitutional amendment and other forms of regulations.

Whatever the actual reforms will be and the manner in which these are to be carried out will, I suppose, emerge from this Conference and similar initiatives.

In terms of politicians, including those aspiring to be politicians in the future, there is no short-cut to political maturity. Firstly, it depends a lot on voters’ choices. My suggestions in that area will be made shortly.

As far as individual politicians are concerned however, if we wish to develop in this day and age, I can only suggest education. I have always believed that education and interaction in today’s context mean much needed exposure of one’s values to those of others, whether locally or internationally, with view to grow in knowledge and understanding.

This I believe is the start of a process which, if nurtured, will result in a person who is mature and operates by good principles and who is able to see life in its proper perspectives.

The more of these people we have, the larger and better the pool from which voters can select representatives become.

Electoral System

The second prong of the approach I suggested is improvement in the electoral system and related practices. I do not propose to offer a specific system here but I am convinced that reform is necessary if others are to work. That is to some extent outside the scope of this Conference.

Reforming the electoral system however remains very relevant as parallel changes that should supplement initiatives
made in relation to political parties and politicians.

It is rather unrealistic to divorce reform of the party system and politicians from reform of the system through which politicians were elected in the first place.

I urge those currently considering reform to broaden their considerations and suggest an alternative electoral system that might be more conducive to the kinds of changes they envisage.

Minimising Corruption

The third prong of approach that I envisage relates to reform aimed at curbing or minimising corruption amongst national leaders.

This is indeed a very broad area that cuts across the board and a rather difficult one to deal with. As with improvement of the electoral system, here I am not suggesting any specific action.

All I wish to do at this stage is to flag that corruption is not only one of the causes of instability — one that must be addressed as well — but also a factor that may well sabotage any genuine attempts to bring about stability.

While minimising corruption might sound easier said than done, I am consoled by the fact that most developed countries started off with high levels of blatant corruptions, perhaps worse than what we have here, and then slowly minimising corruption to a manageable level.

I believe that as with many other development related issues, it will take time before we reach certain ideals but there is certainly no harm in trying our best to minimise corruption.

Again, I cannot offer any solution here. Education as I have explained earlier may assist here. Besides that, I can only suggest that those working on reform to improve political stability consider extend such reform to cover, say for instance, key anti-corruption bodies and mechanisms such as the Leadership Code and Commission, office of the Auditor-General, the Ombudsman’s office, penal provisions, parliamentary committees, mechanisms within resource exploitation legislation and so forth.

There are already many existing initiatives in some of these areas so perhaps we could simply link up with those behind such initiatives as partners instead of us duplicating efforts.

Improving voters’ perception of parties

The fourth and final prong in the approach I suggested earlier is the improvement of voters’ perception of political parties and their significance.

This is perhaps the toughest part of the approach to carry out because it is far easier to make changes to systems by legislative measures than to compel the masses to think in a particular way.

Realistically, we cannot do this; nor is it desirable that we force our people to do or not do something. However, there is still room for reform of people’s attitude and perception, albeit a patient and slow reform process.

Education would of course be one of the key focuses here. Both formal training and awareness campaigns would help, not only in creating a larger pool of potential quality national leaders, but it would also lead to a bigger portion of our people making rational and well informed choices during general elections.

I would also imagine that if we target the masses while improving the political party system, parties may become more visible; in terms of party driven initiatives and activities (not only during campaigns) so that over time, people may start seeing the party actually in action rather than banking on the future promises of individual candidates.

Perhaps over time too, the hold of family expectations that one must always vote for a relative will ease as cultures lean towards individualism.

While I would not consider that change as desirable, it may well be inevitable in this age of modernisation where cultures slowly adapt to modern values and perceptions.

Of course, there may be other initiatives that we could develop and there are experts around in that particular area. Again, while I offer no ultimate solution here, I hope that by flagging this area of reform, those involved in reform would take my comments on board in the mammoth task that they face in the near future.

Conclusion
In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to once again thank the organisers for this initiative and for inviting me to make observations on the theme of this Conference.

I hope I have set the scene in laying out what I see will require reform if we are to realise political stability and good governance in years to come.

It is now up to the participants of this Conference to flesh out the scope of any likely reform and indeed to put some of my suggestions to test.

I also hope that this Conference is only the beginning of a series of preparatory steps towards reform in the various areas that I have touched on today.

I wish to end this keynote address by saying that we are now at a cross-road where we really need to make some massive improvements.

This is our chance and I strongly support reform in this particular area. When this nation became independent, I was, as the first Prime Minister, very proud of our new found sovereignty and freedom but realised even back on day one that we had a lot of work make our country operate as envisaged in our Constitution.

Thirty years on, I am saddened that some of my concerns back then have not been addressed adequately. I recall in my speech on Independence day, I made the following remarks:

"This is a new awakening for us and a unique opportunity to assess our values and define our goals. What kind of future do we want for this independent country? How do we go about realising that future? These are the questions that we must now ask ourselves, and we must be prepared to work hard with God's guidance, to search diligently for the answers that will satisfy, not only ourselves today, but our children in the future.

I had hoped that over time, Solomon Islands would find answers to many of the questions that were in mind back in 1978.

It is unfortunate that after three decades, we are still asking the same questions and we do not seem to know where to start our search for the right answers.

I sincerely hope that this Conference is the start of our search for answers relating to political stability and good governance.

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