THE VANUA'AKU PARTY AND VANUATU DEMOCRACY

Donald Kalpokas

The Hon Mr Bruce Billson, Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Honourable Senators and Members of the House of Representatives, Excellencies, friends from the Australian National University, ladies and gentlemen…

It is a great pleasure to be with you today in this magnificent Parliament House. Although Australia is an island, I cannot say that, as a fellow islander, I feel I am in familiar surroundings. My island – Lelepa - is a bit smaller than Australia. But many of you may know of my home, the setting of the reality TV show ‘Survivor Vanuatu’.

Today I stand before you as something of a survivor myself. Enduring over three decades of Melanesian politics is as tough an endurance contest as any of the Survivor contestants had to face. Today I would like to speak to you about the early days of political struggle in my country and how and why we formed a political party to respond to the needs of our people. But first allow me to situate my story.

Vanuatu is a group of islands that lie between latitude 13 and 20 degrees south and longitude 166 and 170 degrees east, about 1400 kilometres north east of Brisbane. Before independence, Cook named these islands the New Hebrides, because from a certain angle he thought they bore great resemblance to the Hebrides Islands in the north of Scotland.

Voyaging in the eighteenth century, Cook was not the first European to visit our shores – that honour goes to de Quiros, who landed in northern Espiritu Santo in the 1600s – but he augured a flood of British and French voyagers, traders and then settlers who arrived in the Islands half a century later. Our colonial history is unique in the Pacific, and the world, in that we had two colonial masters at the same time. The French navy sailing from New Caledonia and the British navy, sailing from Fiji, both plied our waters protecting their traders and missionaries, but neither held dominance. So they signed a Protocol in 1914 in order to facilitate a joint administration with
equal influence over this archipelago, which was made for their convenience, that is to say, taking care of their subjects. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the development of the islands and its people.

For ni-Vanuatu, this created more than a little confusion in our minds. I wrote a poem about this in 1974, while I was a student at the University of the South Pacific.

**Who am I?**

_Under the wings of history’s two great enemies_  
I was betrayed into the den of Protocols of 1914,  
My beautiful land was alienated through fraud.  
I am ignorant of the Western shrewd culture  
My future is uncertain,  
Pandemonium is the right word  
For my so-called government,  
I long for a day of improvement.  
I travel abroad with my identity card  
For I am stateless and have no right  
Of appeal in my country’s high court.  
Who am I, lost in this ocean of confusion?  
My ’tea tare’ * takes very little notice of my cry  
At least I am still able to swim  
But I wouldn’t like to be washed ashore  
On the desert of a French Pacific Republic.  
Who am I?  
I am that third citizen of my country,  
The only condominium in the world.

* white man

By Donald Kalpokas

What I was trying to say in the poem was that there was no process of decolonization at all by the British and French administrations in the former New Hebrides. The purpose of the 1914 protocol, I repeat, was mainly to look after the interests of British and French settlers and their optants. We, ni-Vanuatu, had no formal recognition under the system, being treated merely as ‘Natives’, to be
cared for by our masters. But the British and French disagreed on many issues and we watched as
their competition affected our people. They called it the Condominium but we came to see it as the
Pandemonium. The character of colonial government can best be gauged by the title of Jeremy
MacClancy’s book on the history of colonialism in the New Hebrides – “To kill a bird with two
stones.” We – the Ni-Vanuatu - were the bird.

All the while, without rights, we were losing our land. In 1870s, French and British planters
bought up our islands for coconut plantations. In the 1970s, American speculators subdivided so
much land on Efate and Santo and earmarked it for American Vietnam war veterans.

It was at that point in 1971 when Peter Taurakoto and myself were working as District Education
Officers in Santo, that we decided to start the New Hebrides Cultural Association. "Cultural
Association” because land is an invariably important part of the New Hebridean culture. This we
hoped would attract the interest of New Hebrideans to become members of the Association,
because together we could voice our concerns and stop the land alienation. So in April 1971, The
New Hebrides Cultural Association was formed. When New Hebrideans heard about this, they
became interested in it and wanted to know more about its aims and objectives. There were
meetings held and documents produced to enhance the understanding of the Association’s aims
and objectives. I would say that this was the beginning of the decolonization process in the New
Hebrides.

The system that helped to disseminate the information to the grassroot people was through the
publication of the "New Hebrides Viewpoint" - a periodical that was produced on a monthly basis.
At this point, we met Father Walter Lini and asked him if he would be interested in publishing the
information about the Cultural Association in the Viewpoint, which he was mainly responsible for
editing.

Though there was no formal or obvious segregation between the two language speakers, I would
say that leading individuals who supported independence because of their land rights were
without a doubt predominantly Anglophones New Hebrideans, although some French educated
people also realized the importance of their land rights and joined the Association.
On September 17th, 1971, there was a general meeting of New Hebrides Cultural Association in Luganville, Santo and the majority of the people present at that time realized that in order that New Hebrideans regain their land rights, political independence of the country was essential and that achieving this would only come about through the formation of a Political Party that would concentrate on fighting for Independence. So the Association was renamed New Hebrides National Party, a fully-fledged political party. Lini became our founding leader. The main aims and objectives of the Party were to rally support for its ideas of regaining the land rights. In the meantime, the struggle for independence was based on unity, self-reliance, equality and equal treatment for every indigenous New Hebridean. The importance of maintaining culture and tradition of the New Hebrides was stressed as the cornerstone of any future political, social and economic development of the New Hebrides. It was with this ideology that New Hebrides National Party modeled itself as a Melanesian social democratic movement rather than allying itself as a pure social, western anti-capitalist or a 'Fidel Castro' type of political movement. With this idea, the Party wanted to practice the policy of "friends to all and enemies to none" and therefore allied itself with the non aligned movement, during a time when east and west tensions were high between communist and non communist countries. We began to think about how of kastom would fit into this model, and how we could use it to mould a nation from Vanuatu’s diverse communities.

In 1975, the Condominium decided that there was going to be a Universal suffrage election to elect a Representative Assembly. The National Party took part in that election and won more than 2/3 majority. However, representatives of various organizations that were appointed by the Resident Commissioners, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Co-operatives, suppressed our majority. Even with the amount of support we had from the grassroots, our majority counted for nothing. In 1977, all National Party members of the Representative Assembly boycotted the Assembly permanently and formed our own People’s Provisional Government, focused on non-violence and non-participation in the colonial governments' organizations. Our demands were simple: speedy development and independence in 1977.

That year we called a series of conferences. The first one was called in January, 1977 when the
Party was renamed the **Vanua'aku Party**, meaning 'the Party of my Land'. 1977 was the year of pressurizing the two administrations to speed up the process of Independence for the New Hebrides. They realized that the representative Assembly that was elected could not function without Vanua'aku Party, so they called for a fresh election in November. Vanua'aku Party was willing to participate in the election, provided that certain conditions were met:

a. There would be majority rule, meaning the party that won the election would run the government,

b. No representative of any organization (such as Chamber of Commerce, Co-operatives) could be appointed

c. Everyone elected should be elected through Universal Suffrage,

d. The two administrations would have to spell out their programs for eventual independence.

The two administrations did not want to commit themselves to any of the demands made by Vanua'aku Party, so the Party boycotted the November 1977 general elections. Instead, it set up Vanua'aku Party People's Provisional government in all its controlled areas in the New Hebrides. The result of this action brought the two governments to declare the Union of Moderate Parties candidates that stood for that 'election, "elected unopposed". I should mention at this stage that all the Parties, including the Union of Moderate Parties, which was then called the Union of the Communities of the New Hebrides (UCNH), were totally opposed to independence. Vanua'aku Party in the meantime built up its support in the areas of People's Provincial governments that it set up in the islands.

During its development so far, the Party's structure was based on Democratic principle. The Party executive is elected every two years by congress, made up of subcommittees. The executive includes a President, Vice President, and Secretary General etc. While down at the Village level, the members of the Party formed sub committees through elections every two years with office bearers such as chairman, secretary, treasurer etc. The policy of non-participation and
Non-violence in the colonial administrations brought the two administrations with the Vanua’aku Party to a "round-table meeting" at the end of 1978, where all sides agreed that Vanua’aku Party could not be left out in any evolution towards independence for the New Hebrides, but rather to be included in the Government of National Unity, that would be formed at the end of 1978.

The Vanua’aku Party agreed to that suggestion on the condition that this Government of National Unity’s purpose was to work on a constitution that would lead the New Hebrides into Independence and that Independence should come within a year. Surprisingly they agreed to these conditions, so Vanua’aku Party joined the Government of National Unity and at the end of 1979, there was a general election that the Vanua’aku Party took part in and won again, more than 2/3 majority. On July 30th the following year, 1980, New Hebrides gained its independence and became known as Vanuatu.

At this point the success of Vanua’aku can be measured by the support that it had enjoyed. The people were willing to donate and run fundraisings like "bring and buy"s to help the expenses of Vanua’aku Party through their subcommittees that paid their annual dues to the Party office. The Party was successful in gaining office because the people trusted it and that it was the only way of gaining independence and regaining their land rights.

The Vanua’aku Party preached Unity above all else. It did not want to talk about Anglophone and Francophone but merely saw everyone as a New Hebridean and encouraged every New Hebridean, and after Independence, every Ni-Vanuatu who wanted to join the Party.

I have been with the Party right from the beginning and I was sad to see that our leader of the Party in 1991 could not think and see things logically. He was a great defender of democracy but he could not let go. When the Party members saw what was happening they decided that it was time to change the leadership. Unfortunately the leader did not want to step down honourably. Some excuse tactics were applied so that there could not be an election of a new executive at the 1991 congress. However, later on an extra-ordinary congress was called in August, the Party President did not attend hoping that he would force the Congress not to elect a new President without him. This did not happen. He was not there, so he was not elected, and instead he formed
his own Party, The National United Party. The VP, long a source for stability, succumbed to leadership challenges. Two new parties, much the same in outlook as the VP but tied closely to the personalities of their leaders, were formed. That year, our former leader joined forces with the party that opposed independence and formed the new government.

I became the leader of the VP that year and, for a short time, the Prime Minister. But everything changed after 1991. That year we lost office. After 1991, government could only be formed through coalitions. It was the beginning of a decade of instability.

We in the Vanua’aku Pati never lost the certainty with which we fought our struggle for independence, but in the decade after 1991 everyone stayed a little confused. Our coalition governments were driven by their short sightedness. They did not serve the national interest but only their individual party’s - and often their leader’s - interests. Many got rich during that time but no one seemed to want to help the grassroots build a better nation. It is important to realize, and this I want to stress, that this growth in individualism and personal gain began to dominate the characteristics of the coalition governments since 1991 and this has been the major cause of the downfall and frequent turnovers in government that have plagued Vanuatu for the past 13 years. Our very recent history is replete with near misses and potential disasters brought about by politicians acting in self-interest rather than the common good, brought about by hubris. As recent events showed, it is perilous to stumble towards the future blindly. For the Vanua’aku Pati it will be a long road back to the position of strength it enjoyed in the 1980s, but Vanuatu needs stability and leadership. While VP once dominated our national parliament, it now represents only one of three factions within the house. Two of our longest standing MPs crossed the floor to join the Vohor government. Exactly half our parliament is composed of independents and minor parties. It is getting harder and harder to agree on anything any more.

As always, we ni-Vanuatu find comfort and strength in our stories about the past, in our history. We are proud of the diversity of our customs. We are also proud of more recent history, about the strength of our faith as Christians. We live through our history. Our community leaders ‘story’ in the nakamal (our traditional meeting houses) and transmit knowledge and customs from one
generation to the next. In our nakamal in Port Vila – the national parliament – Vanuatu’s political leaders must also learn the lessons of the past.

The story about the Vanua’aku Pati, that I have told you today, is a case in point. For ten years we governed with a clear majority in the House. Government was stable. We had a clear vision for the future. We had good governance and democracy. We are a small country, but we are still proud of our struggle for sovereignty. While we may remember the Vanua’aku Pati’s early days in government fondly, we must look to Vanuatu’s future and develop strategies to provide the same opportunities – land, peace and health – for our children and our grandchildren. We must make sure that some of the elements that pushed us into forming the Vanua’aku Pati do not come back again.

I began my speech with a reference to Survivor Vanuatu and my home island, Lelepa. The other small island that you may have seen on Survivor is the flat-topped island, Retoka – Hat Island – where one of our great chiefs, Roi-Mata, is buried. Roi-Mata was a peacemaker who unified the fighting tribes of Efate and ruled in peace and stability about 500 years ago. Today, we need to remember our history, about what is possible when we are united. The Vanua’aku Party was the only party that dreamt of Independence and was able to carry out a democratic process in governance, but as long it is split it will never gain its majority again to run a government on its own right. Coalition governments, divided and divisive, like the Condominium will dominate Vanuatu unless we can turn the tide of personal politics.