Sixth Pacific Parliamentary Retreat  
15 November 2004  
Wellington, New Zealand  

Hon. Paul Tovua  
Tradition/Kastom and Parliamentary Governance!  
- Restoring Real Leadership in Governance -

Introduction

I was asked to discuss insights on the issue of tradition/kastom and how this interfaces with the Parliament system. In trying to do so, I must take a step back and ask...

how did people look after themselves before contact with European civilization?  
how did the impact of European contact affect leadership systems that were in place?  
and  
what are the issues and challenge for leaders in Solomon Islands today?

In our country of some 450,000 people there are at least 60 languages and dialects used in the several hundred islands in our scattered archipelago. Many have died away as we all struggle to understand and communicate with each other first and then with the social, political and economic systems of the world.

Each language group contains more than one landowning tribe, each of which has its leader, usually described as a chief, sometimes loosely referred to as the 'big man'. The use of the words 'chief' and 'big man' has caused problems because it is assumed that chiefs inherit their title whereas a 'big man' is the most influential person in the community. It is most likely that in Melanesia they were one and the same leader who became such because of superior merit or ability, not necessarily simply, because of birth. So the question is merit in what? or what kind of superior ability did people look for? Usually it was strength and the ability to inspire. But also a good memory to recall tribal land boundaries, genealogies. He who could gather resources and influence people was recognized as a leader. As leader he exercised a role of governance and, as any self-respecting leader would, this was carried out after consultation with elders.

In Solomon Islands we started off well in our transition from traditional leadership styles to the modern. We started with hand chosen people appointed to the BSIP Advisory Committee that advised the High Commissioner. Then we elected people on genuine merit to the Legislative Council followed by the Governing Council. People like Willie Betu of Isabel and Johnathan Fifi'i of Kwaio just to name a couple. These were people who rose to prominence in their own communities because of what they had accomplished in leading their people and dealing with change.

I will not dwell too long on the past because it is the immediate future that we must address. It is sufficient though, to realize that traditional leadership in the past did not have to deal with the complexities of becoming part of the global economy. But they did know how to organize their communities to avoid conflict between their followers. This was a central aspect of traditional leadership. With the coming of Christianity, much of the work of conflict resolution was left to the new spiritual advisors. No longer were the custom doctors consulted. Today our people interact in the world economy, buying and selling and adopting many of the trappings of western civilization.

However, many of our people live on the periphery of the global economy and still retain much of their traditional ways of thinking and doing things. However since our own islands economy is small, most of our people cannot rely on the global economy. They must keep one foot in the past for very good reasons; to survive (which they do by traditional cultivation of food crops) and to retain their self-esteem and identity (without which they are nobody).

While this scene is being played out at village and community level, the modern macro needs of the nation have to be catered for, and this is where the nexus (connection) between tradition/kastom and Parliament is weak.

Governance as we understand it, is about gathering common resources and setting up and operating structures and processes so that everyone is cared for. To do this we engage in
politics, which should be the debate, negotiation, compromise and arrangements our people enter into so that we can look after ourselves as a community.

Today however superior merit or ability in important things is almost a non-issue. I have to say that leadership in Solomon Islands is in crisis because of this and in my view there is a great imbalance of governance in Solomon Islands today.

We have Parliament members exercising powers under a constitution derived from the British Westminster system which is meant to condition the national environment so that citizens can benefit from a healthy economy while organizing their own social institutions and arrangements. We have a second level of governance (provincial government), which is meant to provide services on a regional scale.

There are other units of governance. The tribe or extended family - usually a landowning group of related nuclear families who have access to land and the resources on the land. Their governance in the past was by chiefs. In the past there were large clan arrangements. In Guadalcanal there are two, the 'big' and the 'small' clans. In Isabel there are four clans. Rennell and Bellona have two.

Our concern in this meeting however is the interface of traditional governance with Parliament and so we are concerned with traditional community leaders and whether or not they have some interface with national government as organised by Parliament.

Let me offer you these insights, which I do not claim to be great revelations but I can claim they are not often spoken so freely about.

First let me say that we, in our experience of Westminster Parliamentary governance, have ignored traditional leaders. The reason is quite obvious. Traditional leaders were never geared for nor involved in macro - or large national - issues of governance which is what Parliament is about. There was no single nation state. What we have is a new construct.

The constitution we adopted at independence in 1978 expressed the need for localized governance by including, very late in the negotiations, provision for a provincial government system. This we tried and we have not been successful with it. Our Provincial governments are in as much disarray as our national Parliamentary system.

It seems that instead of empowering our traditional leaders to undertake a level of leadership one step higher than they were used to - in Provincial Government - we instead created mini-Parliaments and called them Provincial Assemblies. Thus you will find the Premier has a Cabinet and Ministers that there is an opposition, an administration, structures and systems for governance, but nothing worthwhile has happened! Instead we have gone backward!

Instead of building on traditional governance, we ignored what was already there probably because we thought at the time that they were irrelevant. Then we superimposed upon traditional leadership another layer of politicians and bureaucratic machinery. In doing so we squeezed out the influence of traditional leaders, leaders who got to be leaders because of superior merit, because of superior ability, because they were able to lead and get things done. Our parliamentary system rendered them disabled and here we are now wondering what went wrong. I will leave that to historians to analyse and explain. I wish to look ahead.

I believe that if we have the will, we can once again empower our traditional leaders. It is very important that we do so for the reasons I will now explain.

The recent social unrest and tensions in Solomon Islands all came about because of one reason. and this was the major leadership crisis. It was leadership that failed us, not our people, nor our youth, as some people will have it. It was not only the leadership on Guadalcanal and Malaita that failed us it was leadership throughout the country.

Police leadership failed. Parliamentary leadership failed. The Leadership Code Commission failed. The Public Service failed. The cheeks and balances we thought were in place to ensure good governance, all failed because leaders were -either unwilling or unable to do anything about the problem.

When national government failed after the coup of 2000, many people expected the second level of government (provincial governments) to rally and secure the nation. However this level failed as well.

You might ask who then controlled the country from June 2000 to July 2002? The militant groups think they did? A bunch of criminals thought so too! But it will be of no surprise to you to hear that Solomon Islands was kept afloat, intact and viable by the most neglected group of leaders in the country, the traditional leader and a new cohort of leaders who were private individuals in business, in Churches, women's organisations, sports and NGOs. These were those whose own communities trusted to lead and organize and manage at the micro level.
They rose to the occasion and did this very well despite not having any authority to handle the instruments of governance in provincial and national governments.

These then are the people we must empower in our governance arrangements. They already have space, they already have the constituency they already have networks and systems. All they need to function to their fullest potential is empowerment by national institutions.

Let me clarify, a little further because it may occur to some that community leaders are not necessarily traditional leaders. I believe they are. How many years must pass before a system becomes traditional, before it becomes customary?

I now focus on the tribal leaders specifically. There is a need in any new governance structure for tribal leaders to use their experience and standing for social cohesion. We know they have a role, in leading their people to manage their communities and in dealing with conflicts and resolving disputes. Every village looks to its leaders to ensure that rules are kept and peace maintained.

Some chiefs, without understanding the long-term consequences, have accepted money to allow the use of what is common land and resources. This indicates a need to upgrade their understanding of traditional leadership in a modern age. We cannot expect them to use traditional logic to deal with the modern demands and expectations of the market.

The chiefs are custodians of community land and resources as well as tribal history and folklore. They are worthy people in the eyes of their people and we need to recognize this because they will be with us for a long, long time.

We need to update and enhance their skills in conflict resolution, in pro-active analysis of issues confronting them.

We need to ensure traditional leaders have regular up-to-date information on which to make decisions. How can they make good decisions if these are based on old or dated information? Communication systems in Solomon Islands are very sparse. There is a daily newspaper read by perhaps 5,000 people weekly and a national radio station that is heard best at night when most rural people are already asleep. TV only covers the capital and telephone penetration rates are minimal.

Recently an AusAID project surveyed the media and communications facilities in SI and I am sure their data will show that Solomon Islanders are information-poor!

So what insights have I offered you?

To recap, these are:

i. traditional leadership has been contained at community level and not allowed to impact on provincial or national governance.

ii. traditions and customs that relate to governance have not had to deal with macro issues in the past but, if empowered, they will be able to.

iii. traditional leaders are, like most other people, information poor and cannot improve their performance without regular up-to-date information and communication.

**Recommendations:**

1. We need research into traditional leadership systems and the sociology of our different cultural groups. We don't know enough about how our societies were organized in the past. A lot of myths and legends have crept into the discussion on traditional governance. If we can understand traditional platforms for governance, we can construct new platforms to serve modern needs of governance more holistically.

2. Using the information from research we should then provide capacity building activities to empower traditional leaders, bolster their confidence and allow them to resume their place in governance.

**Implications:**

The first step to ensuring our traditional notions of governance are updated must come from within the country. Parliament and Provincial governments need to sit down and consider this situation very seriously. If they do not study deeply, if they do not discuss widely and if they do not plan wisely, we will be doomed to repeating the mistakes of the recent past.

To illustrate how close to the heart our clans are in our island cultures take the case of James Michener's fabled island of Bali Hai in his book, *Tales of the South Pacific*. Before he died he divulged that the name was taken from the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) where he visited during World War 2. The rest of the story is taken from Vanuatu sources. In some of their central islands
there are three clans. When a person from one clan marries into another clan, the third clan feels left out. 'Vali Hai' is the term used in Ambae to describe the romantic notion of being left out.'