

**PERSPECTIVES**

---

**ENGINEERING POLITICAL STABILITY IN  
SOLOMON ISLANDS**

**OUTCOMES REPORT**

**JENNY HAYWARD-JONES  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR  
THE MYER FOUNDATION MELANESIA PROGRAM**

---

**OCTOBER 2008**

**The Lowy Institute for International Policy** is an independent international policy think tank based in Sydney, Australia. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia – economic, political and strategic – and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia’s international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate.
- promote discussion of Australia’s role in the world by providing an accessible and high quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Perspectives are occasional papers and speeches on international events and policy.

The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

## **Executive summary**

The Lowy Institute for International Policy in conjunction with the Solomon Islands Working Committee on Political Party Integrity Reform held a conference in Honiara on 24 and 25 September 2008 to explore the potential for reform of the political system in Solomon Islands to engineer greater political stability.

The conference was part of a consultative process the Solomon Islands Government has been undertaking to determine the most appropriate political reforms to encourage the political stability and good governance that are necessary for the sustainable development and prosperity of Solomon Islands.

Political stability is widely considered to be critical for long-term economic development and national prosperity. In Prime Minister Derek Sikua's major policy address on 18 January 2008, he argued that political stability was essential to building a stable society and regretted that there was more political instability today than when Solomon Islands became an independent sovereign state thirty years ago.<sup>1</sup> The Prime Minister promised to enact legislation that would give greater recognition and responsibilities to political parties, and introduce reforms in the process of election of the Prime Minister and broader electoral reform.

Political instability in Solomon Islands can be attributed to a number of factors, including disparities between the demands of the Westminster system and society's expectations of members of parliament, weak political parties, the tendency of personal or local interests to override the national interest, flaws in the electoral system, frivolous use of motions of no confidence and corrupt practices.

The Solomon Islands Government has been interested in the reforms undertaken by Papua New Guinea with its Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates. It has also been interested in learning lessons from political reform in other countries in the Pacific Islands region and beyond. The conference discussed political systems and reforms elsewhere that have helped to develop more stable democracies and could be applied in Solomon Islands.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hon Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua. Major policy address on the occasion of the launch of the CNURA government policy document. Honiara, 18 January 2008.

The conference recognised that adopting legislation on the scale of that introduced by Papua New Guinea could be too onerous and costly for Solomon Islands to administer and may not induce the desired political stability. The establishment and maintenance of the administration that accompanied Papua New Guinea's reforms would be difficult to replicate in Solomon Islands given existing resource constraints. A number of smaller-scale individual reforms were thought to have a better chance of being implemented and delivering an impact on stability.

Suggested reforms included the introduction of compulsory registration of political parties; amendment of the electoral system to introduce preferential voting; the introduction of a grace period after a general election during which no-confidence motions could not be moved against the Prime Minister; adoption of a provision for the dissolution of parliament in the event of a successful motion of no confidence; and the amendment of the constitutional provisions for electing the Prime Minister.

The options for reform recommended from this conference included a number of constitutional amendments, which may need to be considered alongside the Constitutional Review process underway in Solomon Islands.

## **Background**

Solomon Islands Government (Cabinet) established a Working Committee on Political Party Integrity Reform in 2008 to investigate the potential for reform of the political system of Solomon Islands. This committee has been conducting a consultative process within Solomon Islands to determine the most appropriate direction for reform.

The committee convened a workshop with civil society representatives on 26 and 27 August 2008 to canvass opinions on reform and identified a number of elements of the Solomon Islands political scene requiring reform.

At the invitation of Prime Minister Sikua, The Myer Foundation Melanesia Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy assisted the Working Committee on Political Party Integrity Reform to convene a forum in Honiara to explore the potential for reform of the political system in Solomon Islands to engineer greater political stability.

Participants in the conference on 24 and 25 September in Honiara included Sir Peter Kenilorea, the Speaker of Parliament, national Members of Parliament, provincial premiers, civil society representatives, former politicians and political advisers. Guest speakers from overseas included Ieremia Tabai, former President of Kiribati and former Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum; Paul Bengo, outgoing Papua New Guinea Registrar of Political Parties; Dr Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, East-West Center, Hawaii; Professor John Nonggor, Legal Adviser to Papua New Guinea's Electoral Commission; Professor Benjamin Reilly, Director, Centre for Democratic Institutions; and Dr Jon Fraenkel, Fellow, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program from Australian National University. Former federal politicians from the Australian Labor and Liberal parties also provided advice throughout the conference. Solomon Islands speakers included Sir Peter Kenilorea, Mr Emmanuel Kohota, Chairman of the Leadership Code Commission, Dr John Roughan, Solomon Islands Development Trust founder, and Mr Paul Tovua and Mr Frank Kabui, independent members of the Working Committee on Political Party Integrity Reform.

## **Causes of instability and desired outcomes of reform**

Political instability in Solomon Islands has been attributed to a wide range of factors, mostly related to poor governance practices. There was some debate as to whether political instability was the cause of lack of progress across many sectors in Solomon Islands or

whether instability was merely a symptom of other problems affecting the behaviour of government and society.

Sir Peter Kenilorea, Speaker of the National Parliament, outlined the main sources of political instability as the political party system; the electoral system; discrepancies between Solomon Islands cultural attitudes about the role of members of parliament and the Westminster system; and corruption.

Deputy Prime Minister Fred Fono stressed the importance of political stability as a platform for nation-building and economic prosperity. The Prime Minister needed to be managing the affairs of the country, not the affairs of individual members of parliament. More certainty and predictability was required in relation to the election of the Prime Minister. Solomon Islands needed to create an honest and political environment in which good governance practices and professional service delivery to voters were paramount.

Participants noted that Solomon Islanders have not historically thought in terms of the nation state. They thought instead in terms of their wantoks, tribes, and islands. The concept of the nation state and Westminster parliamentary democracy was somewhat alien and new. This contributed to the sentiment that national political institutions were introduced rather than home-grown and made it difficult for voters to connect with these institutions.

Good governance practices had close links with political stability. Attempts to improve good governance in Solomon Islands have typically been focused on strengthening the capacity of state institutions, including the Parliament. These efforts had not led to improved political stability, in part because the behaviour of members of parliament was influenced not just by institutions but by a broader political culture attuned to societal demands. Members of parliament struggled with the task of making institutional reform relevant to their constituents.

The Constitution of Solomon Islands has historically made no special provision for political parties. Political parties were weak and had little formal structure or ideology. Solomon Islanders were generally more comfortable with a decision-making process based on consensus rather than the adversarial Westminster political system. Institutional reform that emphasised the significance and importance of political parties could be perceived as foreign. Solomon Islands traditional culture influenced the political culture, which itself influenced political parties.

The conference acknowledged that Solomon Islands was unlikely to move away from the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. The adoption of a presidential system, although such a system worked well in Kiribati, was not thought to be appropriate for Solomon Islands. Continued commitment to the Westminster system, however, entailed a commitment to the development of political parties. Present and past parliamentarians appreciated that there were deeper issues beyond just the need to institutionally strengthen political parties that needed consideration and organisation, noting that members of parliament were expected to perform their duties to manage the affairs of the nation and be responsive to the needs of their constituencies in accordance with Solomon Islands law.

Participants recognised that it was difficult to legislate to regulate the behaviour of members of parliament and maintain constitutional freedoms whilst seeking political stability. Politicians were inclined to take extreme measures to stay in power. Unpopular Prime Ministers have manipulated the law to bypass the legitimate process of their removal. It was important, however, to maintain the rights of members of parliament to act in the interests of their constituents and the nation.

It was difficult to tackle the problem of corruption in Solomon Islands politics. Members of parliament felt their delivery of basic goods and services to constituents was perceived by state institutions as acts of corruption whereas they were only acting in response to long-held cultural expectations of them as community leaders. It would be easier to address corruption if there was a clearer understanding in society of the role of government, members of parliament and political parties.

The need to create greater congruence between social understandings and expectations of members of parliament and the theory underpinning states, parties and Westminster democracy was seen as crucial in properly addressing the causes of instability. Political instability was fuelled in part by members of parliament striving to meet societal expectations, and the challenge of addressing the causes of instability involved developing a new foundation for uniting a diverse nation with one national direction and political appreciation.

Politicians and parties had to stop lamenting political instability and take bold steps towards strengthening good governance and restoring public confidence in political processes. They had to take responsibility for bridging the gap between the Westminster parliamentary system and the cultural expectations of voters. The challenge of addressing instability required greater nation-building efforts by politicians and civil society.

## Political party integrity legislation

The conference discussed integrity legislation introduced in Papua New Guinea in the form of the 2001 Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC). Speakers noted that OLIPPAC sought to cover three important issues:

1. The need for political parties to have a formally recognised organisation and office established to administer party affairs. This entailed egalitarian principles and prohibitions against having regionalist policies.
2. Introducing measures to introduce greater order to politics, particularly with respect to the formation of government and the behaviour of politicians.
3. Addressing the role of independents.

The Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates was recognised as an ambitious attempt to regulate the behaviour of candidates and political parties. The OLIPPAC model was relevant because it sought to address problems in Papua New Guinea that were very similar to those of Solomon Islands. The introduction of OLIPPAC was credited with delivering the first ever full-term government in Papua New Guinea, that led by Prime Minister Somare from 2002 to 2007. Some analysts believed that OLIPPAC had delivered only superficial stability to Papua New Guinea as the turnover of government ministers remained high and there were frequent associated changes in the bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup>

Papua New Guinea's outgoing Registrar of Political Parties, Paul Bengo, said total costs of administering OLIPPAC had grown from PGK500,000 to PGK4 million since establishment in 2001. The capacity of Solomon Islands to implement and enforce political party integrity legislation was just as important as the practicalities of this kind of reform. Frank Kabui pointed out that the lack of human and financial resources were already obstacles for improving public administration and the implementation of legislation in Solomon Islands. The probability that the Solomon Islands budget would not be able to support adequate financial and human resources to implement OLIPPAC-style legislation would mean it would be unlikely to have the desired impact on political stability.

Papua New Guinea's legislation attempted to increase the number of women candidates by offering to reimburse parties who supported women candidates with 75 per cent of electoral expenses if the female candidate won more than 10 per cent of the votes in her electorate.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jon Fraenkel, Anthony Regan and David Hegarty, *The dangers of political party strengthening legislation in Solomon Islands*. SSGM Working Papers. Canberra, State Society and Governance in Melanesia, The Australian National University, 2008, p 6.



Papua New Guinea delegates admitted that this was only a token gesture. Solomon Islands could take the opportunity of political reform to seek ways of increasing opportunities for women candidates.

### **Registration and development of political parties**

The Constitution of Solomon Islands has historically made no special provision for political parties. Political parties were recognised as having not worked in the past within Solomon Islands, and to the extent that they have been used, were very weak. Political parties were seen as not being an organic product of Solomon Islands culture, incorporating as they do Westminster concepts of a strong Government and Opposition based around party structures.

Participants agreed that there were some benefits to greater stability to be gained from developing a stronger party system in Solomon Islands. Voters would have a better idea of their candidates' policies if they belonged to a party structure; candidates would have the support of a party network and party platform when they stood for election; efforts to introduce public funding for candidates to reduce the influence of external actors in election campaigns could be more easily distributed through parties than to individuals; women might find it easier to be elected under a party banner and with party support than as an individual. Solomon Islands parties could be assisted by political parties in other countries in the region with advice in their developmental stages.

The conference recognised there were risks that a top-down approach to developing political parties might not succeed. Successful parties usually evolved out of ideological or other divisions in society. Participants believed, however, that it was worth attempting to drive the process, given that parties had not so far developed organically. The conference recommended that legislation be introduced to compel parties to register and compel candidates to register as members of parties or as independents prior to general elections. This legislation should also specify criteria for registration of parties. Suggestions were made that parties should have national coverage or at least branches in three-quarters of provinces. This would encourage parties to develop national agendas and prevent the emergence of ethnically-based parties. This was particularly important in Solomon Islands, given the recent history of ethnic conflict between Guadalcanalese and Malaitans, and given that one group - Malaitans - made up 40 per cent of the population of Solomon Islands.

While the development of political parties was recognised as important for the future stability of the political system, the existence of parties themselves did not guarantee parliamentary stability. Vanuatu, which shared cultural norms with Solomon Islands, has had a history of strong political parties which pre-dated independence. The right to form parties freely was enshrined in Vanuatu's Constitution but no legislative provision exists for the registration and control of parties. Vanuatu's political parties operated a membership system, had established branches and office-holders and held regular conventions. Vanuatu, however, has endured political instability on a similar scale to Solomon Islands. No-confidence motions have been tabled or threatened in almost every parliamentary session. There were sixteen changes in government between 1991 and 2004 in Vanuatu.

### **Corruption, funding and financial disclosure**

The lack of transparency around the influence of external actors such as local and foreign business interests in election campaigns contributes to instability. The contributions of such actors fed imbalances in horse-trading, increased the likelihood of no-confidence motions throughout the life of the parliament and affected the ability of members of parliament to act in the interests of their voters rather than their sponsors. The conference considered it was vital to reduce the influence of corruption in the political process.

The Leadership Code (Further Provisions) Act 1999 and Chapter VIII (Leadership Code) of the Constitution already compel members of parliament to provide financial disclosure documents related to their personal and familial financial affairs. The difficulties experienced by the Leadership Code Commission and Ombudsman in enforcing their powers to reduce corruption meant that it was important to ensure these accountability institutions received sufficient funding, were staffed adequately and given the freedom to conduct investigations according to their mandate. The follow-through of police and courts on investigations related to breaches of the Leadership Code was also vital to building public confidence in the integrity of political processes. If charges were laid against a candidate in relation to improper financial dealings, other candidates may be less inclined to accept donations from questionable sources.

It was important to ensure candidates were funded by legitimate institutions so as to eliminate the need for them to look to other external and business interests. Papua New Guinea delegates explained that funding of political parties still allowed a limited sum to be contributed to a political party, but also introduced strict requirements of disclosure, requiring

any contributions to be paid through the registry of parties to ensure greater transparency. If Solomon Islands was to introduce public funding for political parties, the government would need to introduce compulsory registration of political parties.

The availability of the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) to members of parliament to distribute in their constituencies was perceived to be a significant contributor to instability. The lack of transparency around the expenditure of the RCDF aroused suspicions that it could be used for corrupt purposes. It also enhanced public perceptions that members of parliament were responsible for delivering goods and services directly to their constituencies, which inhibited proper functioning of a Westminster democratic system. The RCDF was funded by donors and paid to members to fund development projects in their constituencies. The amount given to members has increased from \$5,666 in 1992 to \$2.0 million in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

In August 2008, the Solomon Islands Parliament passed a private member's motion tabled by Hon. Patteson Oti, Member for Temotu Nende, for the regulation of the disbursement of Constituency Development Funding for which Members of Parliament are held accountable. Mr Oti said members were expected to be "project managers" and "social security agents" in managing the RCDF and this affected the time they were required to spend on their parliamentary and executive duties.<sup>4</sup> It was hoped changes to the regulation of RCDF would help voters understand the role of members of parliament.

### **Electoral system reform**

The current first past the post voting system allowed candidates to win seats with the support of a small minority of voters in any given electorate. In the 2006 election, the number of votes won by successful candidates ranged from 352 to 2,292, with an average of 1,186. The smallest winning margin was just two votes and the largest was 1,114, with an average of 347. Most candidates were thus able to secure victory by focusing their campaign on a few villages rather than their entire constituency.

Members of parliament at the conference pointed out that voters expected them to assist with basic needs such as food supplies, school fees and fuel purchases, which made it difficult for candidates who did not demonstrate capacity to meet these needs to be elected. The

---

<sup>3</sup> National Parliament of Solomon Islands. *Parliament decides to regulate RCDF*. 2008:

<http://www.parliament.gov.sb/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

candidates with the greatest capacity to deliver cargo to voters had an advantage over candidates appealing with broader party and national development ambitions. The electoral system encouraged voters to elect a member based on his or her ability to deliver on their material needs rather than on their party platform. It has also been conducive to corrupt practices like vote buying.

Options that required candidates to obtain 50 per cent plus one of the vote and limited and full preferential voting were considered. The requirement to obtain 50 per cent plus one had instilled stability in representation in Kiribati's parliament. This requirement would be difficult to implement in the current first-past-the-post system in Solomon Islands. Only three members of the current parliament had won their seats with more than 50 per cent of the vote in their electorate in the 2006 elections. A requirement for candidates to obtain 50 per cent plus one of the vote in order to be elected would entail the introduction of a preferential system or options for second round voting.

Two options were discussed – limited and full preferential voting. Papua New Guinea speakers explained that limited preferential voting was introduced in Papua New Guinea because the high rate of illiteracy of voters would make it difficult for them to use a full preferential system. Limited preferential voting was introduced after the OLIPPAC legislation in Papua New Guinea in order to promote the election of candidates with broad-based support in their electorates, rather than those elected by tribal group block votes.

Under Papua New Guinea's limited preferential voting system, candidates need to obtain sufficient primary votes to avoid being eliminated in the first round of counting and minor preferences from others to gain a majority of votes. The process is limited because only the first three preferences indicated by voters are counted. Unless one candidate has an absolute majority of valid votes in the count, the candidate with the lowest tally is eliminated and his/her second or third preferences are then distributed as marked to remaining candidates. After being redistributed twice, votes are deemed exhausted and lapse, thereby reducing the size of the count. The process continues until one candidate receives 50 per cent plus one of the votes remaining.

Full preferential voting, which involved numbering all candidates in preference order, enabled a simpler counting process than limited preferential voting, and if the literacy and numeracy skills of voters could cope with it, was a better system.

Participants believed that a form of preferential voting would be preferable to the current first-past-the-post system. Changes to the electoral system of Solomon Islands would require amendments to the National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act (Cap 87), which makes provisions for parliamentary constituencies, registration of electors and the conduct of elections. In particular, Section 38 (Method of Voting) would require amendment if a system of preferential voting was to be introduced.

### **Election of the Prime Minister**

The process for electing the Prime Minister in Solomon Islands is outlined in Schedule 2 of the Constitution. As soon as possible after a general election or when there is a vacancy in the office of the Prime Minister, the Governor-General convenes a meeting of members of parliament for the purpose of electing a Prime Minister. All members of parliament are eligible to be candidates and require nomination by four other members of parliament, with members limited to nominating one candidate. The election meeting, at which votes are cast by secret ballot, is presided over by the Governor-General. A candidate will be deemed to have been elected if they receive an absolute majority of votes. If no candidate receives this absolute majority of votes at the first ballot, the candidate who receives the fewest votes is eliminated and further ballots are held until one candidate receives an absolute majority of votes.

Electing the Prime Minister in Solomon Islands involves complex horse-trading between individuals and loose coalitions. The lack of clear political party agendas, political party leaders or allegiances of candidates, whether independent or loosely affiliated with parties, means voters do not know which candidates are likely to be nominated as Prime Minister when they vote. The election of Snyder Rini as Prime Minister in April 2006 occurred after a two-week period of opaque horse-trading. The public protests that erupted after his election led to riots which resulted in arson attacks of much of Honiara's Chinatown. This event has led to questioning of the process of electing the Prime Minister.

Participants proposed a number of options to improve the process. There was general consensus that members of parliament must retain the right to elect the Prime Minister. The most popular reform measure proposed would see the party that won the highest number of seats in the election given the first option to nominate the Prime Minister, provided that the leader of that party had been able to form a coalition. This arrangement would create more

certainty and transparency. This reform would require an amendment to Section 33 and Schedule 2 of the Constitution. The current weakness of Solomon Islands political parties, however, would make it difficult to enforce this reform. The success of this reform would depend on a requirement to register parties and to nominate party leaders prior to elections.

It was recognised that a coalition formed by the leader of the party that won the most votes would not necessarily create a full-term stable government. Although it would reduce the amount of horse-trading, it would not eliminate the need to negotiate and would not necessarily reduce opportunities for external actors, such as business interests, to influence the process of electing the Prime Minister.

### **Motions of no confidence**

The tabling of motions of no confidence against Prime Ministers has long been a feature of Solomon Islands politics. Some 25 motions of no confidence have been tabled in the Solomon Islands parliament since independence in 1978.<sup>5</sup> The threat of a motion of no confidence stood over every Prime Minister's head in the lead up to and during parliamentary sessions. This threat, effectively holding Prime Ministers to ransom, constrained policy development and implementation.

The tabling of motions of no confidence has often been used by politicians as a tool to protest the government's activities or to gain power themselves rather than seek to remove a poorly performing government. Members of parliament were sometimes motivated by a need to obtain funds quickly to threaten a vote of no confidence, which then forced Prime Ministers or their contenders to find sufficient funds to stay in power or fund a coalition to challenge for power.

Opposition members tended to prefer tabling motions of no confidence over other Westminster democratic mechanisms of opposing the government, such as using parliamentary question-time periods to probe government activities, using parliamentary committees to examine government expenditure and making use of the media and other public forums.

---

<sup>5</sup> Harry Grenfell, *Votes for Prime Minister and motions of no confidence (1974-2007)*. Personal communication, 2 October 2008,

Former Australian members of parliament pointed out that a censure motion was a more appropriate way for the Opposition to express disappointment with the performance of the Prime Minister or other members of the Government. The lack of a strong party system and the tendency of parties to lose coherence between elections every four years meant individual members of parliament felt they did not have a platform from which to express discontent. Strong oppositions were vital for the effective functioning of democracy. This was another good reason to register and develop political parties.

Frequent motions of no confidence also caused public frustration with members of parliament, whom they perceived to be obsessed with their own affairs above the interests of their constituencies and the nation. The public was concerned that public monies were wasted during the negotiations to safeguard the position of the Prime Minister after motions were tabled.

Motions of no confidence were arguably a symptom rather than a cause of instability but nevertheless posed a significant obstacle to effective government. One option to address the problem was to amend the Constitution to introduce a grace period of at least 12 months after elections during which motions of no confidence could not be tabled against the Prime Minister. Participants acknowledged that this measure could entrench a poorly performing and unpopular Prime Minister. They believed, however, that Prime Ministers needed to be given a fair opportunity to implement their policies free from fear of being toppled, at least for a limited period of time.

The other option, which could be combined with the implementation of a grace period or introduced in its own right, was to amend the Constitution to introduce a provision that forced the dissolution of parliament on a second successful motion of no confidence. This provision was used in Kiribati. Former Kiribati President Ieremia Tabai emphasised that it had been crucial in underpinning stability in Kiribati for 29 years - only three premature dissolutions of the Kiribati parliament occurred in that period.

Participants were concerned about the Electoral Commission's capacity to run additional elections more than every four years. Most acknowledged, however, that members of parliament were highly unlikely to vote on a motion that would see them face the electorate at the ballot box again unless there was a real national crisis that required replacing the Prime Minister. This provision would be a significant disincentive to the tabling of frivolous no-confidence motions.

## **Party loyalty issues**

The strengthening of party loyalty was a central aim of Papua New Guinea's Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates reforms. Under OLIPPAC, members of parliament who voted against their party's resolution or position in relation to four particular matters were deemed to have resigned from that political party and are subject to sanctions. Similarly, independents who voted for the appointment of a particular Prime Minister must continue to vote in support of that Prime Minister in relation to the four matters, or alternatively, abstain. These matters were motions of no confidence against the Prime Minister, the appointment of a Prime Minister, the national budget and amendments to the Constitution. Aside from promoting party solidarity, it aimed to reduce the influence and bargaining power of independents and party members as well as entrenching patterns of loyalty to parties' voting behaviour in parliament and bringing more stability and strength to the executive.

Taking the Papua New Guinea model as inspiration, participants considered the option of compelling members of parliament who voted to elect the Prime Minister, whether as part of a party decision or as an independent, to refrain from voting against the Prime Minister in votes of confidence, on the budget, and on constitutional amendments. These areas were considered important to maintain the effective functioning of government. This type of reform would not prohibit members of parliament from crossing the floor to oppose other legislation. Nor would it prohibit parties allowing members to vote on conscience when appropriate.

There were significant concerns that this type of reform would constrain individual members' freedom of choice. The conference agreed that the development of political parties should lead to party leaders exercising more discipline over the voting patterns of their members in order to encourage more consistency and predictability in the parliament.

## **Independent Group in Parliament**

The Constitution of Solomon Islands makes provision for a group of members whose members are independent of the government and opposition and whose leader commands their support. The leader of the Independent Group has traditionally been more influential in parliament than the leader of the opposition. This was seen to undermine the development of a healthy Westminster system and the proper role of an opposition. The conference agreed



enthusiastically that the constitutional position of the leader of the Independent Group in the parliament should be abolished.

This reform would not affect individuals' capacity to stand and be elected as independents. While the development of political parties was important for greater stability, Solomon Islanders believed strongly that independent members of parliament were an integral part of the political system.

### **Rejected options for reform**

A number of reform options that had been raised by participants at the workshop in August were considered but thought to be unworkable or inconsistent with democratic principles so valued in Solomon Islands. A suggestion to introduce legislation that forced the recall of members of parliament who did not perform to the expectations of the constituency was rejected by participants on the basis that constituencies could be manipulated by opponents of individual members of parliament and force unnecessary and expensive by-elections. A suggestion to introduce basic qualifications for candidacy such as a minimum level of schooling, literacy or medical fitness was rejected on the basis that it would constrain the representative nature of the parliament and limit freedom of choice for voters. It was acknowledged that individuals serving a sentence or had a suspended sentence of imprisonment for six months or more and undischarged bankrupts were already precluded by law from standing for election to parliament. Individuals who had completed a sentence of imprisonment were eligible to stand for election, however, which was perceived to have implications for the reputation of parliament. Participants did not reach agreement on addressing this issue.

### **Civic education**

Voter behaviour and expectations, both prior to and in between elections, also contributed to political instability. Members of parliament were under pressure to deliver cargo to their constituents in order to be elected and to stand a reasonable chance of being re-elected. The high turnover of members at each election (50 per cent of members lost their seats in the 2006 elections) was indicative of the pressures on members to meet local demands. Candidates who did not have adequate financial resources to meet voter expectations were often beaten by those who did. These expectations were driven in part by the lack of capacity of Solomon

Islands government institutions to deliver public services to the whole country, which forced voters to turn to their members of parliament.

There was a tendency in Solomon Islands to see society and state as separate. This tendency was influenced by a weak sense of national identity and stronger associations with clan groups and local communities. Traditional communal lifestyles encouraged voter associations with community leaders and community interests rather than political parties and the national agendas they pursued. Poor links between communities and state institutions in the capital, Honiara, also did not help voters understand the value of strong political parties, which had national development plans.

The government, in order to assert the proper role of the state in governing the affairs of the nation, had to take responsibility for the provision of civic education, especially around election times. Political parties, as they developed and strengthened, also had to educate voters about their role in parliamentary democracy.

## **Recommended reform options**

The conference participants made a number of recommendations for reform to encourage more political stability in Solomon Islands. These recommendations included:

- Introducing legal measures that would make registration of political parties compulsory and establish criteria for parties to meet registration requirements;
- Amending electoral laws to introduce a system of preferential voting, which would have the benefit of being more representative of the will of the majority of the electorate than the current first past the post system;
- Amending the constitutional provisions for the election of a Prime Minister to introduce a requirement that the leader of the party that wins the highest number of seats in parliament be given the first option to form a government and nominate the Prime Minister; and to introduce a requirement that the Prime Minister be elected in a formal sitting of parliament, which would involve a secret ballot;
- Consider the introduction of a constitutional provision that prescribes the exact gap between a general election and election of a Prime Minister;
- Amending the Constitution to introduce a grace period of at least 12 months after a general election during which no-confidence motions could not be moved against the Prime Minister. This would create a period of stability to enable the Prime Minister to implement policies for the good of the country;
- Introducing a provision for the dissolution of parliament in the event of a successful motion of no confidence. This provision should dissuade members from voting against the Prime Minister on a frivolous basis as the prospect of facing the electorate again would not be attractive to many members but leaves open the option to end the rule of unpopular or poorly performing Prime Minister;
- Abolishing the constitutional position of the leader of the Independent Group in the parliament;
- Political parties should exercise more discipline over the voting patterns of their members in order to encourage more consistency and predictability in the parliament;
- Strengthening the resources and capacities of accountability institutions such as the Auditor General, Ombudsman, and Leadership Code Commission to enforce existing financial disclosure provisions for politicians and political parties and increase the transparency of information about the sources and allocation of funds;
- Developing civic education programs to educate voters about political parties and the role of members of parliament.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fraenkel, Jon, Anthony Regan and David Hegarty. *The dangers of political party strengthening legislation in Solomon Islands*. SSGM Working Papers. Canberra, State Society and Governance in Melanesia, The Australian National University, 2008.
- Grenfell, Harry. *Votes for Prime Minister and motions of no confidence (1974-2007)*. *Personal communication, 2 October 2008*.
- National Parliament of Solomon Islands. *Parliament decides to regulate RCDF*. 2008: <http://www.parliament.gov.sb/>.
- Sikua, The Hon Prime Minister Dr Derek. Major policy address on the occasion of the launch of the CNURA government policy document. Honiara, 18 January 2008.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jenny Hayward-Jones* is Program Director of The Myer Foundation Melanesia Program at the Lowy Institute. Prior to joining the Lowy Institute Jenny was an officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for thirteen years, serving in the Australian missions in Vanuatu and Turkey, where she was Deputy Head of Mission from 2004 to 2007. She worked as Policy Adviser to the Special Coordinator of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands from its inception in July 2003 and in 2004 and was a member of the election monitoring team in Solomon Islands in 2001. Jenny holds a BA (Hons) in political science from Macquarie University and a Masters degree in International Relations from Monash University; her Masters thesis focused on governance and political change in Vanuatu.

**LOWY INSTITUTE**  

---

**FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY**

**[WWW.LOWYINSTITUTE.ORG](http://WWW.LOWYINSTITUTE.ORG)**