# Off to the Solomon Islands: Australia's Civilizers Get Busy

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*A small riot.  Unrest.  Risk of collapse.  All given a ballooning effect and inflated for policy makers across the ocean.  Before much time elapses, Australian security forces are skirting off to restore order in their vast watery neighbourhood.  It is a reminder that such relations in the Pacific region are a mixture of intervention, forcible charitable guidance and, at times, plain scolding.*

In the Solomon Islands, Australian interventionism was originally cloaked in shining dress, justified as humanitarian and utterly noble.  By the time some 2,000 troops, police officers and support personnel, mostly Australian, were deployed in 2003, the country had already mounted regional interventions in Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (1997) and East Timor, the latter as part of a UN-mandated mission.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was given a rhetorical flourish of preventing a "failed state" while easing Australian anxieties in a region marked by a supposed "arc of instability".  In a conscious nod to making sure the mission would be seen benevolently, the PR pen pushers came up with the pidgin named Operation Helpem Fren.

At the time, **Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza** had to address certain concerns: Would his country simply become yet another staging post for other powers, or, worse, slide into the role of Australian puppet state?  "This country belongs to all of us," he promised.  "It's our country."  This was only after a fashion.  The RAMSI mission only concluded in 2017 but it came with a new security treaty signed between Canberra and Honiara permitting the easy deployment of Australian force, defence and civilian personnel in the event of a national emergency.

In an environment psychically shaped by the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001 and the grotesquely named "Global War on Terror", Australian policy makers came to see terrorism everywhere and unstable, indigent states as incubators for the next enterprising bomb maker.  This was the kind of torturous, and quite frankly criminal

reasoning, that had justified the fictional links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.

The new breed of Pacific Islander terrorists were reasoned like the Reds of Old, only these might be lurking behind coconut trees with heavy weaponry or found laundering money.  In the case of the Solomons Islands, such outfits as the Guadalcanal Liberation Army and the Malaita Eagle Force fit the bill, even if that fit was forced and awkward.   "We know that a failed state in our region, on our doorstep," warned Australian **Prime Minister John Howard** in an address to the Sydney Institute in July 2003, "will jeopardise our own security.  The best thing we can do is to take remedial action and take it now".

But it was not always so.  In January 2003, the Australian **Foreign Minister Alexander Downer**, at a rare lucid moment, stated that, "Sending in Australian troops to occupy the Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme."  The Australian taxpayer would be unconvinced by such need; the exit strategy would be unclear and problematic and, perhaps most tellingly, foreigners did "not have the answers for the deep-seated problems affecting the Solomon Islands."

Within a matter of months, Australia found itself in an illegal assault led by the United States on Iraqi sovereignty and jauntily committing troops to the islands.  Howard flew into Honiara to boast that Australian forces had secured the surrender of Harold Keke, who had been given the elevated historical standing of a warlord, and the netting of 3,000 weapons as part of an amnesty.  He stressed all those characteristics all architects of empire should keep in mind: rebuilding the local police forces; "attack" corruption; improve living standards; and prosecute criminal, destabilising elements – according to the rule of law, naturally.

This month, the political classes in Canberra were again wondering what to do with the Solomon Islands.  Protests calling for the resignation of **Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare** had led to civil unrest in the nation's capital. A police station and building within the parliamentary compound were set ablaze; instances of looting and property damage were reported.  Schools were closed.  Again, the divide between poorer Malaita and wealthier Guadalcanal, was spoken of.  Again, the politics of the provinces were being stirred by the politics of the central government in Honiara.

In this case, there was an added dimension.  The Solomon Islands had made a decision in 2019 to cease recognising Taiwan and switch its allegiance to Beijing.  The Premier of Malaita Province, Daniel Suidani, had been unimpressed with the decision taken by the national government.  An unsettled Sogavare, wishing to shore up his own sinking position, put in the call for Australian assistance.

Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** was not wasting any time in citing the security treaty to deploy Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police personnel. "We have been watching the ongoing protests in Honiara with concern," he stated in a press release. "We continue to call for calm, for an end to further violence and emphasise the importance of resolving tensions peacefully." At a press conference on November 25, Morrison rather unpersuasively declared that it was "not the Australian Government's intention in any way to intervene in the internal affairs of the Solomon Islands".  The Australian presence did "not indicate any position on the internal issues" of the country.

In such interventions, complex local factors behind agitation and unrest tend to be ignored as too complex for the briefing rooms in Pacific capitals and Canberra.  The obsession with security rather than dealing with specifically local issues, such as lack of opportunity,

inequality and various local grievances, encourage the use of the police baton or the military rifle.  Generalisations become the norm, and, as Aiden Craney [points out](#), propel narratives about the area being an "arc of instability".

Some digging is required before coming to a franker overview of such instances of meddling.  Joanne Wallis, writing in 2015, [simply takes it as fact](#) that Australia, "the resident superpower in the South Pacific", and also allied to the United States (its "closest ally") has been given the role of responsibility "for the South Pacific."

In such attitudes civilization's burdens are borne with Kiplingesque gravity, even if given the gilding of security.  Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands" (1899) was yet another urging in the imperial argot, this time to the United States, to assume burdens and responsibilities in the Pacific.  Theodore Roosevelt, ever supping from the cup of imperial sentiment, was unimpressed by the language but entirely convinced by the purpose.  In copying the poem to his friend **Senator Henry Cabot Lodge**, [he remarked](#) that it was all "rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view."

Responsibility has often meant sticking your nose in the affairs of those swarthy barbarians whose understanding of civic institutions might be a bit sketchy.  It's all done because they hardly know any better, and you have the self-interested answers in making sure such people are sorted.  "Australia," writes Wallis, "has been expected to maintain regional political, social and economic order, and ensure that no hostile power establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which to attack Australia and threaten allied access to air and sea lines of communication."  That's more like it: an honest statement of vulgar realpolitik.

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