

Tonga: the Domino Theory Revisited

Those of you who are old enough to remember the Vietnam War will probably also remember the Domino Theory. We were told by the Australian Government at the time that if the Communists won in Vietnam, the neighbouring countries would “fall” one by one until the dreaded scourge reached our own shores. Palpable nonsense that it was, it convinced a few people. History, of course, proved it to be merely a baseless attempt at defending the morally indefensible decision to send Australian troops to fight and die at the behest of the USA.

I was reminded of this last week when a decision was made to send a small contingent of Australian soldiers and police to Tonga to help local authorities contain an outbreak of riotous behaviour on the part of the Pro-Democracy movement. “Perhaps,” I thought, “our current leaders also subscribe to some version of the Domino Theory, whereby if we don’t stop Democracy in Tonga it will spread throughout the South Pacific until it reaches Australia. Heaven forbid!

It appears that the Pro-Democracy forces have been stalled, at least temporarily, so Howard and Co can breathe a sigh of relief. Not only can Tonga continue as a bastion of non-democratic government, resisting even those small moves towards reform that have been evident in places like Nepal and Saudi Arabia recently, but thanks to our swift action, we are in less danger of an outbreak of Democracy in Australia. The anti-terror laws, sedition laws, and industrial relations changes can all stay safely in place, and the Prime Minister can continue to boast (as he did recently) that he deliberately acted against the wishes of the Australian people in sending troops to Iraq.

It is worth looking at Tonga a bit more closely than the mainstream media have, in order to understand what is behind the recent headlines. It is a monarchy and the King appoints the cabinet ministers. The parliament has only a minority of members who are elected by the populace. There is a class of nobles who have considerable political power as well as being the major landowners. This situation has, not surprisingly, given rise to a number of claims of corruption.

Since 1986 the Pro-Democracy movement has been trying to bring Tongan politics out of the 19th Century. After twenty years of trying the “correct channels”, the frustrations of some of their supporters spilled over last week into the streets of Nuku’alofa, where much of the CBD was torched. It seems that the only people killed during the disturbances were looters trapped inside burning shops. It also seems that the King and his ministers could not rely on their own police to restore order.

That Australia should despatch police and troops to assist in protecting and evacuating our own citizens might be considered fair enough (if somewhat of an overreaction), but Howard and Downer made it explicitly clear that the reason for armed intervention was to support the Tongan authorities. In other words, we are once again interfering in a small Pacific country’s internal affairs and reinforcing our image as the neighbourhood bully.

If Australia wants to be seen as playing a constructive role in the region, it might be in our interests (and it certainly would be in the Tongan people’s interests) to broker talks on how to bring about Democracy as quickly and as peacefully as possible. Otherwise we should just butt out. It is typical of our present government that their first (and so far only) response was a military one.