

## **Is Australia the Regional Bully?**

The Australian Government likes to give the impression, both to voters at home and to allies overseas, that it is a benevolent presence in the South-west Pacific, doling out aid and advice to those smaller nations that are newer to the practice of democracy and less able to look after themselves and their citizens.

Many Australians, including the majority who disagree with our having sent troops to Iraq, believe that our military and police intervention in the Solomon Islands was worthwhile because the alternative was a descent into chaos and anarchy.

This is a patronising and paternalistic attitude, fuelled in the main by a racist belief that our largely British heritage, our greater material wealth and our white skins somehow suit us for a role of controlling the way the “less fortunate” lead their lives. In fact, a very important reason behind such shows of force is to keep the wheels of commerce oiled, to ensure that Australian investments are not put at risk.

Decisions to send troops and/or police to serve in foreign countries are rarely simple ones. There is a complex mix of factors influencing any such decision, but far too often conservative governments err on the side of wanting to use force or the threat of force to solve what they perceive as problems. This is the easy way, and it often relies on false assumptions about the “problems”. Iraq is an obvious example of this, the Solomon Islands perhaps a less obvious one.

The Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Manasseh Sogavare, set up a commission of enquiry into the riots in Honiara in April of this year. This was in defiance of the Australian Government, which wanted to pursue through the criminal justice system the prosecution of two of the Sogavare Government’s cabinet ministers who were allegedly involved in fomenting the riots.

In setting up the commission, the Sogavare Government coopted a lawyer and academic, Australian citizen Julian Moti. The Australian response to this was to dig up eight-year-old charges against Mr Moti concerning an alleged child sex offence, charges which had been thrown out of court in 1999, since which time Mr Moti has been living and working in Australia without attracting any interest from the police. It stretches the bounds of credibility that the desire to re-open his case just happens to coincide with his role in advising and assisting the Solomon Islands Government. It is a devastatingly effective way to discredit a man.

Australia’s heavy-handed approach to its smaller neighbours extended to its reaction to the Papua New Guinea Government, which allowed Mr Moti to return to the Solomons rather than be extradited to Australia. Sanctions were imposed on Sir Michael Somare, the PNG Prime Minister, who has been a friend and ally of successive Australian governments for 40 years. It has also included an attack on the judicial system of Vanuatu, the country where the original charges against Mr Moti were heard. This was in addition to the recent raid by Australian Federal Police on Prime Minister Sogavare’s office, during which government property was damaged and equipment seized.

Little wonder then, that the current regional gathering of heads of government in Fiji has been listening with enthusiasm to charges that the Howard Government has been arrogant and contemptuous in its dealings with other nations in the region.

There has been talk by Foreign Minister Downer about Australian aid being dependent on what he calls “good governance”. What he really means, it appears, is allowing Australia to get its own way. The times when the islands of the South-west Pacific were actual or *de facto* colonies of Australia are now as definitely part of history as the times when our own states were colonies of the British Empire. This is the 21st Century, and gunboat diplomacy, racist arrogance and economic exploitation have no place in it.