

REFLECTIONS: 39 YEARS OF SOVEREIGN STATEHOOD IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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(Views expressed herein are views of the Author only and do not necessarily reflect views or policies of Government of Papua New Guinea.)

I am honoured to be invited by the Dr Nicole Haley, Head of State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program and President of Papua New Guinea Canberra Students Association Mr Patrick Niesi, to speak today in celebrating our 39th Anniversary of Independence and to share with you some of my personal reflections, musings and thoughts on this period of our journey as a sovereign nation.

I, like many others, was around that time when that journey began. But before that 16th day of September in 1975, there was much by way of preparations mostly in some haste. A constitution needed to be in place, to guide our new nation's journey. Policies deriving from that Constitution, on the type of society and the direction of the journey we may take our nation were issues of grave concern for our founding Fathers to ponder and debate in the then Constituent Assembly in the period from 1972 onwards. There was self-government on 1st December 2003. So my first task is to reflect on the years immediately before self- government and then take us from there to now. There are others who have also reflected on that journey in their own way. Ross Garnaut has extensively written on the foundational macro-economic policies, such as the hard currency (Kina) policy, which arose not because of long hard periods of deliberate policy consideration and formulation but was driven by Port Moresby women led by Josephine Abaijah, storming the then Chief Minister, Michael Somare's Office protesting against high cost of goods in trade stores in Port Moresby. Hence the birth of the hard Kina Policy which stood PNG in good stead for a decade or so after independence just to meet its almost total and final demise in 1996 when it was devalued and "floated" well kind of floated.

I was a member of the Pangu Party in 1971, working as a Trade Unionist with the then Public Service Association in Port Moresby, busy with some Union wage cases the most significant case the Port Moresby Urban Minimum Wages which I advocated seeking to increase the Urban Minimum Wages of Workers in Port Moresby.

The reason why I consider this as crucial to my greater appreciation of challenges PNG faces heading towards independence was because of the robust nature of debates and in policy evolution for Incomes Policy for PNG after independence, the link between policy and politics that Pangu political Leaders at the time were mainly drawn from Trade Union Ranks as against other political Leaders who are from Business and Rural plantation and Local Government backgrounds. This background is useful in understanding the political and the modicum of ideological underpinnings to the debates in the Constitutional Planning Committee. The Constitutional Planning Committee was eventually dominated and driven by two significant political figures of the time and continue to do so in the political life of PNG to this day. They are of course Sir John Momis and Sir John Kaputin. (John Ley-2014)

Egalitarianism, Decentralization of powers closer to majority rural Papua New Guineans, over concerns for Growth and trickle down effects of orthodox economic development ideology pre-occupied the deliberations of our Founding Fathers to guide us towards the type of Society PNG should become. The Eight Point Plan was conceived and gained nourishment from these debates.

Outside these constitutional debates, those of us in the Union ranks and mothers and teachers, were arguing for the family Minimum Wage to include one child as the basis for a family Unit to the Port Moresby Urban Minimum Wages Board. It would be a shock for you all today but yes, in those days a family Unit for the purposes of Wage Fixation is a man and his wife. The gross injustice of this and other principles driving the colonial Incomes Policy is that the three Big Oligarchs, Steamships, Burns Philp and WR Carpenters we argued are not re-investing their Profits in PNG but repatriating them. So the unfortunate congruence of policy circumstance when those in Finance and Planning (CPO) (John Langmore-2014) whose minds were pre-occupied in setting Incomes, Wages and Prices policies for an Independent PNG were seen as not being realistic. In particular, when they argued for wage restraint in towns such as Port Moresby, so the Government would have the means to provide services to our rural majority seemed vacuous and vexatious at the time. Their argument that the well-off minority elites in the urban areas need

to sacrifice for their rural majority lacks serious appreciation of PNG society and culture. I have been advocating to the Business Organizations and the Minimum Wages Board that, “Some Academics, some politicians, and policy makers, in Papua New Guinea ... see Papua New Guinea society as consisting of two sections, the Papua New Guinean Wage Earners both in towns and rural areas and Papua New Guineans living in subsistence (sector) in the villages. Therefore the economy of Papua New Guinea centres around the relative wealth and economic activities of these two (sectors)...I argued that this view is a “misconception” of the workings of (PNG) society, ...that there are no means of traditional ties and obligations permeating through these two sectors. (Lepani, 1974) I still hold the view today even more so now that the mobile phone has reached the hands of my rural under-privileged relatives. Just a few months ago I have texted an “Edict” in response to my relatives in Trobriands, asking for money for the funeral feast of one of the recently deceased relatives. “Tell all the surviving relatives, nobody is to die for the next 2 or 3 years until we catch up with all the outstanding funeral feasts.”

I was even arguing then that these policy makers must guarantee two things;

1. That money saved from keeping wages low are actually spent on services to improve health and education and infrastructure for the benefit of our rural majority and
2. That profits accruing to the Oligarchs, at the expense of wage earners are reinvested in PNG for PNG’s development.

The essence of my case at the time is the emerging Constitutional Imperative that of equal distribution of wealth and political power in PNG promulgated in the Eight Point Plan.

The next phase of this journey for me is my move to Head the Bureau of Industrial Organizations, a Body set up and funded jointly by PNG Self - Government and ILO, at the request of the then Minister of Labour Gavera Rea, a Unionist and staunch Pangu Hanuabadan.

Suffice it to mention, here that three key areas