**A PERSONAL TRIBUTE**

**TO THE**

**GRAND CHIEF, SIR MICHAEL THOMAS SOMARE,**

**THE FIRST PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**BY**

**SIR JOHN RUMET KAPUTIN**

**CANBERRA, 13TH MARCH, 2021**

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Your Excellency, the High Commissioner of Papua New Guinea to the Commonwealth of Australia, H.E. Mr John Kali and Mrs Kali.

The Minister representing the Prime Minister and Government of Australia, Hon. Mr Zed Seselja, MP.

Distinguished Invited Guests.

Members of the Staff of the High Commission, other Papua New Guineans living in Canberra, and those of you who have travelled here from other Australian cities.

Friends of the Grand Chief, Sir Michael Thomas Somare, and the Indpeendent State of Papua New Guinea.

Before I make my personal tribute for a very special human being about whose life has been re-written by many people, including many Australians, who claimed to have known this man, let me thank you, Your Excellency, for temporarily transferring the National Haus Karai from Waigani to our only little piece of dirt and home in this huge continent that no one in his or her moral right can take away from us as citizens of the Independent State of Papua Ne Guinea and God’s planet.

The Grand Chief, Michael Thomas Somare was born at Rapdik between Rabaul and Matupit Island on April 9th, 1936, and passed away on February 26, 2021. He repaid his national debt on behalf of the people, in 2014, when he led Papua New Guinea’s official delegation, accompanied by H.E. Charles Lapani, to attend the National Service held at the Sydney Town Hall, offered by the State Government of New South Wales in honour of the Eminent and Honourable Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia who had the intellectual and political courage to offer Papua New Guinea political independence.

Though handicapped by the global pandemic and our difficult economic situation, it is our national duty and responsibility as Papua New Guineans to carry on and to build on our nation which is free of any political debt and build a stronger nation economically. As a former Minister for Finance and also Minerals and Energy, I know that we have the resources and a growing reservoir of intellectual capacity to make this happen, even to stop the global robbery of our dividends.

In my capacity as the Secretary General of the ACP Group of States, under the Cotonou Economic Agreement with the European Union, I had worked with Leaders such as Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo, Col. Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, now in prison, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, I know we can do better, but contingent on our efforts to get rid of the small robbers who steal from us at night when they think that we are asleep.

Now, Your Excellency, let me turn to pay my tribute to my friend, the wonderfully “complex man” we discussed yesterday when my wife and I paid Your Excellency a courtesy call and we exchanged many special memories of our interactions with the Grand Chief. I will accept your understanding that today is a special and unique day for us to pay our Eminent Leader our last respects. Please bear with me

Your Excellency, the High Commissioner, thank you very much for the courtesy and your personal invitation extended to Lady Kaputin and I to join you and Mrs Kali, and our friends in Canberra and those who have travelled here from other Australian cities to honour and pay our last respects and tribute to our Eminent leader, the Grand Chief, Sir Michael Thomas Somare. Your Excellency, we have indeed lost a close personal friend whom I had known for 61 years, but before I offer my special tribute for my friend, please allow me, Your Excellency to pause for a moment and to offer my tribute to a number of important leaders who are closely linked to the Grand Chief’s endeavour for our political independence and freedom.

1. A short time ago, I stood before a congregation in an Anglican Church in Brisbane to offer the Second Reading from the Bible and to say farewell to another close friend, Sir Mekere Morauta, with whom I had served the Grand Chief in one capacity or another before Sir Mekere himself would become Prime Minister. He had served as our first Secretary of Finance, before his appointment as the Governor of the Bank of Papua New Guinea, and still later as the Managing Director of the Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation. On this sad occasion, my son John Jnr, who had studied with James Morauta in Oxford in the United Kingdom had joined me to convey deep respect, sympathy and condolences to Lady Rosleyn Morauta and their son, James for the loss of a very decent human being who had studied Economics at UPNG and Adelaide University before he became a public servant and then as a legislator in our Parliament.
2. At the end of January, Lady Kaputin and I attended a small service at a Brisbane Funeral Home to pay our respects and tribute to Sir Joseph Tauvasa who had attended St Brendan’s College in Yeppoon, Central Queensland, with Sir John Momis and Sir Henry ToRobert who passed away in 2018. Sir Joseph studied at the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of Miami in the United States of America, where he had graduated with a Master’s Degree in Aviation. Sir Joseph was our first Secretary for Transport and later served as General Manager of Air Niugini, and at the time of his death, he was the Chairman of our national airline. He had also worked with Shell Company, supported by Mr Kevan Gosper AO, the head of the Shell Company in Melbourne at the time, and who had worked as Area Manager in Rabaul in the early 1960’s and as one of Australia’s finest Olympians, he was invited to be the Manager and Coach of our first international team to complete at the 1962 British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Perth, Western Australia, where, as a member of the team, I had competed as a sprinter in athletics. When I called Mr Gosper to inform him of Sir Joseph’s death he was very sad and had offered his sympathy and condolence on behalf of himself and his wife, Judy, to the family.
3. Sadly, just last weekend, Lady Kaputin and I were advised from Rabaul that Dr Henry Okole, a distinguished Tolai scholar, who was released by the University of Papua New Guinea, where he worked as a lecturer on Political Science, to serve as my Chief of Cabinet when I was appointed as the Secretary General of the ACP Group of States under the Cotonou Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Commission of the European Union based in Brussels, Belgium, had also passed away. I had spoken personally to his wife, Velin, last Thursday before we left Brisbane to fly here to Canberra. Messages of sympathy and condolence have been received from the current Chief of Cabinet of the ACP Secretariat in Brussels, as well as many of his former colleagues at the Secretariat, including some who are now retired in Africa. I have responded to thank them through the present Chief of Cabinet, Mr Andrew Bradley.
4. In this vein, allow me, your Excellency to add to the list, a close and dear friend of mine and my late father, the name of Sir Ling James Seeto, who was a closed associate and business partner of Sir Albert Maori Kiki, and who was one of the pillars of the Pangu Pati with Sir Ling James Seeto. Together they had formed a most formidable team as business partners in Kwila Insurance and the Kwila Real Estate Company throughout Papua New Guinea.
5. Finally, I wish to remember a very important and special Australian leader, critical to our political independence, the late Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, whose Memorial Service at the Sydney Town Hall I had attended in 2014, when I had flown from Melbourne to Sydney with the former Governor General of Australia, the Rt. Rev. and Hon. Peter Hollingworth, and as our flight had been delayed on two occasions out of Melbourne, the former Governor General had kindly offered for me to travel with him to the Sydney Town Hall. Of course, with the assistance of a police escort, we made it on time for the service.

Following this special ceremony, I was happy to join the official contingent from Papua New Guinea, led by the Grand Chief himself, accompanied by H.H. High Commissioner, Charles Lepani, who was in Canberra at the time. Having established my special relationship with Mr Gough Whitlam before Independence, it was indeed a special privilege to attend the ceremony offered by the State Government of New South Wales.

As I was traveling back to Melbourne, I was extremely grateful to the former Governor-General, who had offered a lift back to the Sydney International Airport, where he had kindly invited me for a light meal and he would introduce me to a number of the former Prime Ministers and Members of Parliament, who had attended the special service for Mr Whitlam. We would take the same flight back to Melbourne where Lady Kaputin was waiting for me.

Your Excellency, I have taken this opportunity to recognize and thank the various leaders as well as Prime Minister Gough Whitlam because all of them have made their special contributions to our political independence and the development of Papua New Guinea – a noble path that was important to the Grand Chief as a teacher and as a political activist and our first Prime Minister.

**A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO A DEAR FRIEND**

Before I underscore my relationship with the Grand Chief, I had served in his government in a number of ministerial portfolios including Justice, Higher Education, National Planning and Development, also Deputy Speaker , as well as the unique duty of serving on the Constitutional Planning Committee that was responsible for the report to the Prime Minister, and on the basis of which our National Constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly with amendments from the Government. Such a historic document would have the structure and the provisions for our system of government when we became the Independent State of Papua New Guinea in 1975. It is possible that I may have been the only Member of Parliament to have served in the various Cabinets of the Prime Ministers from Sir Michael Thomas Somare to Sir Bill Skate in one capacity or another. I thank all our Prime Ministers for their confidence in me and for giving me the privilege to serve our Nation and the people for 30 years as the Member for Rabaul and was extremely grateful for the support by the Grand Chief for me to become the Secretary General of the ACP Group of States based in Brussels, Belgium between 2005 to 2010. It was indeed a special privilege to have been the only Papua New Guinean from the Pacific Group to be responsible for a group of 79 nations of the world.

When I left Papua New Guinea in 2005 after 30 years as the Member for Rabaul, I would not see the Grand Chief again until the ACP Leaders Summit in Accra, Ghana in 2008, and the following year in 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, during the Global Summit on Climate Change attended by President Barack Obama, with whom I had the privilege to meet briefly before the Leaders Meeting. Quite by coincidence, his parents (is father, an African from Kenya and his mother, a white American) had also studied at the University of Hawaii in the early 1960’s, just before I arrived in Honolulu for my studies in 1966. During my study in Honolulu, I would be involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War. I was also there when the Leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr Martin Luther King, Jnr and Senator Robert F Kennedy, the younger brother of President John F Kennedy, were assassinated in 1968. The President himself had been assassinated in 1963 when I was still a student at the Port Moresby Administrative College where my wife, Christine, was a lecturer at the time. I was still at the College when a distinguished Kenyan political leader, Mr Tom Mboya, visited Port Moresby and had addressed the students so eloquently about colonialism in his country and the problems over land between the white planters and his people. These were the events that would affect my life and would help to prepare me to confront the political future and strengthen my relationship with the Grand Chief.

As a matter of history, I had met the Grand Chief in 1960, well before the formation of the Pangu Pati and before the former Kiaps and ex-missionaries would come to support him. But before these people were to flock around him, I had at least discussed many issues with him during our first encounter in Madang, when he had offered a roof over my head when I could not stay with the rest of my team in the hotel because of the racist policies and the colonial laws of the Australian Government at the time. I had just turned 19 when I became the first black athlete to play in the Inter-Territory Rugby League Championship. But as I had told him that this was not my first time to be confronted with such humiliation. In Port Moresby, my Australian partner and I had been confronted with many racist policies and practices in housing entitlements, restaurants, where there were signs for “Whites Only” and the beaches with signs saying “No Natives and Dogs allowed”. And, in 1960 after I had scored the winning try for Papua in the Inter-Territory game in Port Moresby, Christine and I were refused by the President of the PRL to attend the presentation dinner at the Papua Hotel. But the most inhuman act by the colonial police was to hunt for us and humiliate us when we were spending weekends with friends and relatives, in fact just the same as the racist policies and the practices of the white Apartheid regime in South Africa. The last straw was when the white Minister of our Church refused to marry us principally because at the time the various missions were in bed with the Colonial Administration in the Territory. Not satisfied with this kind of behaviour, and knowing that Konedobu was very much under the thumb of Canberra, with no clear path that I could see in the future, I was determined to do some further studies to prepare myself and to understand more about colonialism; to read more about history, political science, philosophy and economic development. I therefore undertook further studies in the Port Moresby Administrative College from 1963 to 1965, and with the support from Professor Ron Crocombe and Professor Ben Finney of the University of Hawaii, I was able to obtain a grant or scholarship from the East-West Center to study at the University of Hawaii between 1966 to 1968. On my return, I would also take other courses at the University of Papua New Guinea before I returned to Rabaul in 1969 after 14½ years absence from the Gazelle Peninsular.

**Sir Michael Thomas Somare, his special friends, and our common struggle for political independence.**

The Grand Chief Sir Michael Thomas Somare was born on 9th April, 1936 at Rapidik near Rabaul, and not far from my village on Matupit Island. When we met in Madang for the first time and he had kindly offered a roof over my head, it was the discovery of our respective birth places in the same area that had contributed to our common respect for each other. But while this was an important factor for our political future, we had also come to appreciate our sufferings during World War II; the inequality in wages and the lack of proper housing for the government workers including the teachers, the policemen, and worse still, the plantation workers, the wharf labourers, and the town workers, who had to clean the bucket toilets in the town where there was no running water. Also our common appreciation of the white racism and the discriminatory practices would be most irksome to us. We had also come to appreciate that the land issue was a major challenge for our people in all our districts or provinces. For the Pangu Pati, the trade unions were calling for better wages. The central question was how to achieve a better future. While, at the time, the Pangu Pati and others were calling for change within the colonial system, some of us were calling for a completely new system – and a new constitution.

A Special Group of Leaders

Whilst many statements have been made about our first and longest serving Prime Minister through the print media, radio and television as well as social media both nationally and internationally, I know the Grand Chief would like to make a special reference to a close group of friends during his life in politics, such as Sir Vincent Eri, Sir Ronald ToVue, Sir Paulias Matane, and Sir Alkan ToLolo. They had attended school together and trained together as teachers, and no doubt, would have left their mark among the young generations of Papua New Guineans in the workforce in the public service, the private sector and the community as a whole. Of this most eminent group of Papua New Guineans, the Grand Chief became Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea; Sir Vincent and Sir Paulias both held the eminent position of Governor General; while Sir Alkan Tololo served as a senior Diplomat in Malaysia and Australia after being Director of the Department of Education, while Sir Ronald ToVue was a Magistrate and later Premier of East New Britain before becoming a successful businessman in Rabaul, Kokopo and Port Moresby. The Grand Chief was most appreciative and grateful for their service, contributions and support as we grew as a young nation. It was indeed a very special group of eminent Papua New Guineans.

**WE HAVE LOST A GREAT LEADER AND A SPECIAL FRIEND**

On Friday, 26th February, 2021, Lady Kaputin and I received the sad news through our son, Tyson, in Hobart, Tasmania, that the Grand Chief, Sir Michael Thomas Somare, our first Prime Minister, had passed away in Port Moresby. Since then, many leaders including our current Prime Minister, the Hon. James Marape, and the Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon. Scott Morrison, among many others from the region, have made their appropriate statements regarding the life of a very special person and have offered their respect, prayers and condolences to the family of our first Prime Minister and father of the people of the Nation.

Lady Kaputin and I join the leaders to offer our love and deepest sorrow and sympathy to Lady Veronica and the children and grandchildren at the loss of their distinguished father and the father of our nation. We share our grief with them and pray that our Heavenly Father will comfort and protect them as well as our people in our collective bereavement and national mourning. As a Tolai leader and a Member of Parliament for 30 years between 1972 and 2002, may I extend our deepest sympathies and sense of loss to the family and the Nation. We have lost a rare and great leader, and a dear and personal friend.

**A poignant memory of the offer of a Special Award**

Before I conclude, I would like to relay to you of a special memory of the last time the Grand Chief and I had lunch together in 2013. I was at Parliament sitting in the Speakers Gallery when he sent me a note to invite me for lunch at the Grand Papua Hotel which I had accepted with special joy and great appreciation. I had travelled with him in his official vehicle to the restaurant, but I had no inkling of what was to come next. During our last meal together he took the opportunity to offer me the distinguished award of *“Grand Companion of Logohu (GCM)”.* Unprepared for this question, it was to my greatest regret and sorrow that I declined his most generous offer saying to him that my reason for not accepting was that he had already recommended me for the CMG which I received in 1983 and I had already received my Knighthood in 1997. Despite all this, he had wanted to do something for me and I am sorry that now as I stand before you to farewell him, I am sorry that I did not accept his most generous offer and kind gesture. Farewell my dear friend and thankyou for all that you have done for me. Goodbye and Rest in Peace.

I will conclude with this wonderful quote from the great South African Leader, Mr Nelson Mandela, which I feel would sum up the life our own great Leader the Grand Chief Sir Michael Thomas Somare:

*“Real leaders must be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their people. A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dreamt of.”*

Thank you