

POLITICAL STYLE IN MODERN MELANESIA*

In recent writing about contemporary politics in Melanesia one frequently comes across the term *style*. The suggestion seems to be that there is, if not a unique, at least a distinctive Melanesian style (or styles) of politics. Hegarty, for example, speaks of an 'essentially accommodative political and governmental style' in Papua New Guinea (1979c:110) and Quiros (1979) speaks similarly of a 'conciliatory style of political leadership' in that country. (Also see Standish 1978:29 and Herlihy 1982:575.) Melanesian political leaders themselves frequently talk about doing things 'in the Melanesian Way' (for example, see Lini 1980).

This paper seeks to identify some of the elements of political style in modern Melanesia and to relate them to broader aspects of the region's political culture.

I begin by accepting that there *is* such a thing as political style; I will not, however, attempt to define the term, except to say that it has something to do with the way in which nations' leaders (and by extension nations themselves) behave within a framework set by formal constitutions and *realpolitik*. The suggestion that one can distinguish a national or regional political style implies the existence of an identifiable *political culture*,¹ though

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¹ On the concept of political culture see Almond and Verba (1963), Pye and Verba (1965), Almond and Powell (1966:chapter 3), Kavanagh (1972). This writing might be compared with the earlier literature on 'national character', of which there is an extensive review in Inkeles and Levinson (1969).

it does not deny the importance of individual personality in political style. By way of crude illustration, from outside Melanesia: I think one might reasonably argue that, say, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Emperor Bokassa, Ferdinand Marcos, and Bob Hawke display a variety of political styles which reflects differences in the respective political cultures from which they have emerged, and which could not be easily transferred from one political culture to another, and that the spectacle of the United States presidential elections reflects a style of politics which varies from that of even such other predominantly Anglo-Saxon Western democracies as the United Kingdom and Australia.

The literature of political science has little to say about political style at an aggregative level, except perhaps in the field of international relations where several authors have referred to national styles as an important factor in determining patterns of international negotiations (for example, see Druckman 1977 and references cited therein; Spanier 1978: chapter 12). There is, on the other hand, a substantial literature on personality and politics (much of it contributed by psychologists), which has a lot to say about individual styles and has occasionally attempted to make the leap from the individual to the group or nation, mostly however in the context of 'developed' societies.² The anthropological literature on leadership in Melanesia is also of obvious relevance to the question of style in modern politics, but except for the work of Standish on Simbu politics (especially Standish 1983, 1992) and perhaps that of Finney (1973) on bigmen and *bisnis* – both of which are about Papua New Guinea highlands societies – there appears to have been little interest in the relationship between traditional and modern political styles.

² The personality-and-politics literature is well reviewed in Greenstein (1969, 1975). There is also an extensive bibliography in Hermann (1977). For specific comments on aggregative analyses of personality and politics see Greenstein (1969:120-140; 1975:60-68). Probably the best known study of personality and politics in 'transitional societies', is that of Pye (1962); there is also some interesting material in Legge (1973).

In approaching the question of political style in modern Melanesia one possible method would be to compile a series of political biographies and attempt to generalise national characteristics from these. Entertaining though such an exercise might be, the prospect of deriving some stylistic equivalent of a 'modal personality' from profiles of political leaders as personally disparate as, say, Walter Lini, Iambakey Okuk, Marten Tabu, John Kasaipwalova, Jimmy Stevens and Ratu Mara seems sufficiently daunting to suggest an alternative approach (a reaction which recent personality-and-politics studies would seem to support).

By way of alternative, it might be argued that if there is a distinctive Melanesian style of politics (or if there are distinctive styles) one might expect to locate its essence in a specifically Melanesian political culture (or cultures). Constraints of time and space prevent me from attempting to draw a comprehensive picture of Melanesian political culture. Instead I will suggest that there is a number of respects in which the culture(s) and the recent political history of Melanesia are, if not unique, at least unusual. Some of these are examined briefly in the following paragraphs.

The scale of politics and the politics of scale

Ward (1982) has touched on the question of the relative smallness and isolation of Melanesian societies and the impact this has had on their politics. This relationship is examined in greater detail in Benedict (1967) and in May and Tupouniua (1980). To quote from the latter:

The relationships between individuals in a small scale society thus tend to be more intense and social transactions to be dominated by personal relationships reflecting, amongst other things, kinship, village ties and ascriptive status. At the same time, the members of a small scale society tend to be more dependent upon one another's actions than do those of a larger society. Typically, political and economic relations are dominated by series of recipro-

cal obligations (between equals and between patrons and clients) but it is common, also, for small-scale societies to employ social pressures to ensure individual conformity to the values and objectives of the group. It is often suggested that smallness of scale promotes social cohesion, however there is little evidence for this; indeed as Benedict (1967:49) rightly points out, “intense factionalism” is a common feature of small communities. [May and Tupouniua 1980:423]

Diversity and (a little bit) beyond

Melanesia’s diversity is legendary. Linguists have commented on the region’s extraordinary linguistic diversity – and have made the interesting suggestion (Laycock 1982:33-38) that this diversity is not a function of isolation but that language has been used deliberately as a means of differentiating one group from another. Prehistorians and anthropologists, while reminding us of the extent of traditional exchange networks, have described a situation in which social units were typically small and in which intergroup relations were limited both in physical range and content.³ It may be that we are sometimes inclined to overemphasise the extent of isolationism in pre-contact Melanesia; nevertheless the fact remains that even compared with tribal Asia and Africa, pre-contact Melanesia was fragmented to an unusually high degree and that to a substantial extent this fragmentation has survived the colonial period.

Related to this is a provocative suggestion made by Barnes (1962/71:9):

A characteristic of highland cultures, and perhaps of Melanesia as a whole, is the high value placed on violence In these circumstances we might expect to find a less developed system of alliances and ‘counterveiling’ forces, and less developed arrangements for maintaining peace, than we would have in a polity directed to peace and prosperity.

³ See papers in May and Nelson (1982 vol 1).

Bigmen and all that

A substantial body of recent writing on leadership and social stratification in Melanesia seeks to distinguish between a stereotype of the typical Melanesian traditional society as egalitarian and communalistic, with leadership determined by competition between men of influence (what Standish 1978 refers to as the 'Bigman Model'), and the reality of socially hierarchical, status-conscious societies in which heredity frequently played an important part in the selection of leaders. Without wishing to detract from this recent emphasis on social stratification (except occasionally to query the source of the stereotype), I think it is important that we not lose sight of the essential elements of truth in the stereotype: namely, that relative to Polynesia and most parts of Africa (not to mention traditional societies in Europe and Asia) social stratification in Melanesian traditional societies was not particularly formalised and that traditional institutions such as sorcery and warfare, as well as social attitudes to wealth, were frequently used as a means of preventing forceful individuals or groups from rising too far above the common herd (cf. Moulik 1973:123-127).

The exception in this respect, it would seem, is Fiji. There, traditional societies appear to have been more formally stratified and the status ordering, having been consolidated by colonial rule, has so far proved enduring (see Nayacakalou 1975; Nation 1978).

Whatever the situation may have been, there is now a well entrenched (if not universally accepted) belief that egalitarianism and communalism prevailed in pre-contact Melanesia, and that these values are integral to 'the Melanesian Way':

... our peoples are communalistic and communalism is the basis for our traditional way of life. Our values therefore must be communalistic. [Gris 1975:137]

The colonial experience

With respect to the impact of colonial rule on Melanesia's political culture, I offer four comments.

The first is the unremarkable observation that the impact of colonialism has itself been diverse. Not only have the colonial *masta* exhibited a variety of political styles reflecting *their* indigenous political cultures (see papers by Nelson, Firth, Hastings, Scarr and Latham in May and Nelson 1982, and Ward and Ballard 1976) but the timing of the colonial impact has been responsible for major differences in the attitudes of colonisers to colonised, and particular circumstances of physical environment and historical events (notably the Second World War) have affected the Melanesian societies in different ways. For example, Australian colonialism in the New Guinea highlands in the 1950s was a very different thing from German colonialism in coastal New Guinea at the end of the nineteenth century, partly because of differences in the political cultures of the two colonisers and partly because of differences in the circumstances of contact, but primarily because prevailing attitudes towards colonialism in the late nineteenth century were rather different from the attitudes prevailing in the mid twentieth century (except, perhaps, amongst French *colons*). Similarly, the impact of the French on New Caledonia might have been very different if that territory had had no nickel.

Second, beyond this diversity colonialism has had a universal impact in breaking down traditional isolationism, facilitating the movement of people, goods and ideas, and fostering a national consciousness within the (largely arbitrary) geographical boundaries of the colonial system. Further, the colonial powers sought to develop this wider consciousness within the framework of institutions and norms imported, for the most part, from outside. (Consider, for example, the comments of Waddell 1973 on the appropriateness of the Westminster model to Papua New Guinea.) At the two extremes of this generalisation: in Fiji the

British administration actively sought to 'preserve' elements of the traditional polity; in Irian Jaya Indonesian policy has been overtly assimilationist and the Melanesian political culture has been suppressed by direct political action and by heavy immigration. As in other parts of the world, however, the attempt to modernise Melanesian societies and to create national polities in the colonialist's image has been only partially successful. For one thing, like colonised people elsewhere, Melanesians have already shown a remarkable capacity for adapting modernity to tradition and tradition to modernity and for maintaining, side by side with occasional overlapping, the forms and institutions of traditional politics with those of the introduced system. For another, in Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and Vanuatu separatist and what elsewhere (May 1975, 1982) I have called 'micronationalist' movements have emerged to contest, actively or passively, the political boundaries of the modern states. [See chapter 3.]

Third, and more controversially, it might be argued that while colonialism is very seldom a pleasant experience for the colonised and although Melanesia suffered its share of forced labour, punitive expeditions and the rest, for most Melanesians the colonial impact, judged against the broad sweep of world history, was relatively benign (Irian Jaya being the notable exception). Without wishing to press the point too far – and recognising that in some respects this is a condemnation of Australian colonial rule: there have been few countries in which, as in Papua New Guinea, the indigenous government, elected on a nationalist platform, has sought to postpone the granting of independence. This observation and the implications of it have been elaborated by the African Mazrui (1970:56).

Until the recent interest in large scale mining enterprise, Australian indifference denied New Guineans even the advantage of a shared anti-colonial resentment. The British [in Africa], by being exploitative, were also involved in fostering cultural homogenisa-

tion, some economic inter-action, some constructions of institutions for conflict resolution, and above all the beginnings of national consciousness. By the sin of indifference, however, Australia has denied her dependency such an infra-structure for nationhood. And she has denied her own participation in modern imperialism its ultimate legitimation – the legitimation of having laid the foundations of modern statehood.

Finally, in three Melanesian territories a major impact of colonialism (and I include Irian Jaya as a colony) has been the importation of non-Melanesian people. In Fiji and New Caledonia Melanesians are now in a minority of the population; in Irian Jaya non-Melanesians probably account for around 10 per cent of the population (*Pacific Islands Yearbook 1978:223*), but they are concentrated in the administrative and commercial centres and the proportion is probably rising. Obviously this makes for a different style of national politics.

Politics, economics and bisnis

In 1971 R. Kent Wilson wrote:

When the economic history of Papua New Guinea comes to be written by an indigenous scholar, it is possible that it will be seen in part as the search for a key, a search indulged in by both indigene and expatriate, by both tribes and Administration. Exotic religion, roads, schools, co-operatives, savings societies, information services, business advice and so on, have all been interpreted in some contexts by one or both parties to the dual economy as the key to economic advancement. When frustration or imagination took over, the search was diverted to cargoism, a cult which in broad terms has not been the preserve of the indigene. [Wilson 1971:525]

Nine years later the record of Melanesian business enterprises is little better than it was when Wilson carried out his survey of village industries (Wilson and Garnaut 1968). Equally remarkable is the general failure of the numerous locally-based devel-

opment movements which emerged in Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s. And although various explanations have been offered (e.g. Nadkarni 1970; Wilson 1971; Andrews 1975; also see Jackman 1977) the questions which plagued business development officers and development bank officials in the 1960s remain largely unanswered. Yet individual and group businesses are still seen – perhaps increasingly – as a road to development and to the acquisition of social and political status, and in Papua New Guinea provincial governments are in the process of setting up business arms, already with some unfortunate results.

Peter Lawrence (1982) has suggested a distinction, in traditional societies, between ‘secular or empirical knowledge’ and ‘sacred or “true” knowledge’ and referred to the continued strength – in the face of education and material advancement – of magico-religious thinking as an obstacle to people’s understanding of the operation of the modern world. Certainly what Lawrence would refer to as cargoistic thinking, and what might be more generally described as inadequate understanding and unrealistic expectations about business, provides part of an explanation for the failure, in Western terms, of some business ventures; but it is also clear that Melanesians have not always seen the demise of businesses (or, indeed, their *raison d’être*) in the same terms as outsiders (just as Papua New Guinean lawyer, philosopher and consultant to his country’s Constitutional Planning Committee, Bernard Narokobi opposed the constitutional provision for an auditor-general on the grounds that such an office was unMelanesian).

The relationship between politics and *bisnis* in modern Melanesia is a complex one, especially as in Papua New Guinea, where a government leadership code seeks to restrict the business activities of national leaders, many of whom argue (with Iambakey Okuk) that the accumulation of wealth is an essential element of political status.

At the national level, also, there is in much of Melanesia an element of unreality in the ideological commitment of self-suf-

iciency and the fact that Melanesia is, per capita, probably the most heavily aid-assisted region of the world. Commenting on this in 1970 (from the viewpoint of a political party organiser) Michael Somare (1970:490) said: 'our people are so accustomed to getting things for nothing . . . that they do not see why they should organise as political groups to express these demands.'

What sort of a picture does this leave us with and what sort of political style is suggested by these aspects of political culture?

The first generalisation I would offer – which follows on from the comments about scale and about fragmentation – is that politics in modern Melanesia, even at the national level, is essentially personal and group politics. In the absence of basic social divisions cutting across the Melanesian polities (to the obvious frustration of some Marxist analysts) the bases for political support in Melanesia are typically local or personal. With the exception of Fiji, and the qualified exception of New Caledonia (where French colonial attitudes and policies have produced the sort of anti-colonial nationalist solidarity whose absence in Papua New Guinea was noted by Mazrui), the Melanesian political culture has not proved to be a fertile ground for the growth of political parties. Even in Papua New Guinea, where in the early 1970s there appeared to be a well established incipient party system, political parties have not developed as the proponents of the Westminster model assumed they would; indeed in late 1980 the Pangu Pati machinery in both Morobe and East Sepik – probably the strongest examples of political party development in Melanesia outside Fiji – appeared to be in a state of total disarray. In provincial elections in Papua New Guinea during 1979-80 several provinces (including the East Sepik and Western Highlands) decided that they 'would not have' political parties because parties were 'disruptive'. Moreover where incipient party structures have emerged they have tended to display a pronounced regional bias. Even within the West Papuan liberation movement, personal and regional/ethnic divisions have cut across the common cause of Irianese against Indonesian rule.

In the absence of Western-style parties political loyalties have tended to revolve around clan, local or ethnic divisions. This appears to have two major implications. On the one hand it makes for parochial, pork-barrel politics; on the other it ensures the interplay of traditional and modern politics, with the implications this has for the accumulation and distribution of wealth and influence for political purposes, the manipulation of *kastom* to political ends, and occasionally the use of violence (cf. Standish 1983). A corollary of this is the growing incidence of nepotism (in Papua New Guinea, *wantokism*; in Vanuata, 'family government'). As several people (Melanesian and non Melanesian) have argued, there are strengths in a *wantok* system, but when the impact of *wantokism* is to entrench the position of those who for historical or other reasons have gained an initial advantage in the political-administrative system, *wantokism* has a great potential for exacerbating ethnic and regional tensions (cf. McKillop and Standish in May 1982).

A second observation, which derives from the comments about the fragmentation of traditional society, relates again to the importance of regionalism. Apart from the tendency for regionalism to manifest itself as a basis of political organisation within national politics, Melanesian societies have shown a marked propensity towards decentralisation, separatism and micro-nationalist withdrawal. Aside from such separatist tendencies as evidenced by the North Solomons, Papua Besena, Nagriamel and the Western Islands Movement in the Solomons, the formal decentralisation of political power which has taken place in Papua

⁴ The closest to a coherent statement of 'the Melanesian Way' which I have been able to locate is a piece by Bernard Narokobi in *Post-Courier* 22 October 1974 but there is constant reference to it in papers in May (1973) and Lawrence (1975) has written about it. A similar philosophy is expounded in *The Pacific Way* (Tupouniua et al. 1975). The Melanesian Way philosophy is, of course, embodied in the Papua New Guinea government's Eight Aims and in the preamble to its constitution. [After this paper was written a volume on the Melanesian Way, by Narokobi, was published by the Institute of Papuan New Guinea Studies, Port Moresby (Narokobi 1980).]

New Guinea and has been mooted in the Solomons is highly unusual in the experience of new states.

A third generalisation concerns the inconsistency between the ideology of 'the Melanesian Way', with its emphasis on equality, communalism, self-sufficiency and consensus, and its respect for tradition,⁴ and the reality of political and social change in Melanesia which so often is characterised by social stratification, individualism, dependence and conflict (Standish 1980 uses the term 'jugular politics'), and is so frequently anxious to embrace modern, capitalist development. In part, perhaps, this is evidence of a variety of Melanesian political cultures. In part it is a reflection of the gap between political myth and political reality which exists in all political systems. But it also has something to do with the use of ideologies rooted in a model of harmonious small societies to justify participation in a system imposed during colonial rule. And of course it should be said that 'the Melanesian Way' is not entirely myth. Melanesian politics often does reveal a concern for egalitarianism, a capacity for compromise, and (except perhaps for Fiji) a lack of respect for authority which places it apart from new states in Asia, Africa or America.

In a similar way the emphasis given to *kastom* or *kalsa* in Melanesia is in part evidence of genuine respect for tradition, but it is also a symbol manipulated by politicians (especially young politicians) to legitimate their participation in the modern system and as such, as Tonkinson (1980) has pointed out, can be used both as a force for national unity and a force for ethnic division.

I am aware that this paper does little to capture the spirit of Melanesian political style. And it does nothing to distinguish differential (for example, highlands as opposed to coastal) Melanesian styles. But I hope it does suggest that one might be able to talk about a Melanesian political style, rooted in Melanesian political culture, and that in interpreting contemporary political developments in independent Melanesia non-Melanesian observers should be aware that in part what they are observing is the assertion of that Melanesian style (cf. Quiros 1979 in reviewing Standish 1979).