

Put zest back in our PNG affairs

Annmaree O'Keeffe
The Australian
19 June 2012
P. 10

Papua New Guinea's voters go the polls on Saturday for what is expected to be a fraught, even violent national election. It could be up to two months before they know who will be leading their country. Polling takes two weeks; counting the returns, another three; and then the real counting begins -- who has the numbers to form government.

With a record number of 3435 candidates and 46 parties with skin in this electoral game, it's impossible to predict what the outcome will be. Michael Somare's elevation to prime minister following the previous election in 2007 required a coalition of seven parties plus the support of independents.

But whatever the result, it's time that both PNG and Australia took stock of the bilateral relationship. It's now 37 years since PNG gained independence from Australia and, in that time, the knowledge and experience of PNG among Australians has steadily declined.

The retirement this year of former PNG minister Carol Kidu, herself Australian-born, and former prime minister Mekere Morauta from PNG's parliament is an important reminder that the post-independence generation of PNG leaders who know Australia well are bowing out.

This month's election is likely to bring forth a large harvest of politicians new to parliament and new to what is probably PNG's most important bilateral relationship: Australia. But they will be the ones with a say on how that relationship will be managed. In the absence of any real engagement between both countries, chances are high that the standard rhetoric and response will continue to reflect a relationship in urgent need of attention.

If words and actions by Australia's politicians are any indication, the Australia-PNG relationship, at least in the public arena, is very largely influenced by the aid relationship supplemented by occasional finger-wagging when PNG's habit of exercising its democracy robustly starts to rub uncomfortably. On the PNG side it has been incremental, but the resentment and perception that Australia's approach is at best patronising continues to grow.

It's a relationship that has fallen into a rut, like the old married couple who wake up one morning and realise they've grown apart, that they really don't know each other any more. But, in this case, a quick glance at the map shows that divorce is not an option.

There have been the occasional recent efforts at the political level to rekindle and rebuild the linkages: Richard Marles's efforts with his symposiums on PNG and Julie Bishop's visits to understand better Australia's closest neighbour. But ministerial visits to our neighbour, just an hour's flight north of Cairns, are rare and usually only when the annual PNG-Australia ministerial forum makes it hard to avoid.

The last time an Australian prime minister visited was in 2007. In contrast, the last time a PNG prime minister visited Australia was just last October.

Despite the growing concern about China's influence, the reality is that Australia is by far PNG's most important economic partner and is likely to remain so.

Australia is PNG's principle export market and its principle source of imports -- and in both cases by a substantial margin. Australian business understands the importance of the relationship, having invested more than \$16 billion in the country. Even Australia's civil society, which has been slow to understand just how physically close and important the country is, is increasingly looking north although largely still through the charity lens. And Australians surveyed in the Lowy Institute's 2012

poll on foreign policy showed that they do have a warm spot for PNG in their hearts, with PNG ranking sixth in an overall list of 20 countries.

Yet at the political level the limited engagement stands in stark contrast to Australia's engagement with our other closest northern neighbour, Indonesia. There, ministerial interaction is frequent and dynamic, reflecting the range of interests and challenges the two countries share along with geographic proximity.

With PNG, the willingness to take the engagement out of the rut and on to a level that reflects the long-term economic and strategic importance of PNG to Australia is missing. Or is it just a case of taking for granted those closest to us? As in any relationship, there are grave perils in doing so.

Annmaree O'Keeffe is acting director of the Myer Foundation Melanesia Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.