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How Australia might save PNG from collapse

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The Howard Government has shown it is willing to do more to help Papua New Guinea than Australia has done in the past. But if Australia wants to have a real chance of helping to pull PNG out of its long, sad slide towards state failure, we are going to need to do a lot more still, and to do it very differently. And we need to start soon, because time is running out.

Today in Lae at the annual PNG-Australia Ministerial Forum, an impressive line-up of Australian ministers will sit down with their PNG counterparts to talk about the future of the relationship. They have some good news to celebrate. The "enhanced co-operation" program agreed upon at last year's forum has at last got into gear. Two weeks ago the first Australian police went out on the beat in PNG to help tackle the country's endemic law and order problems.

But let's be realistic: 200-plus Australian police will not turn PNG into a safe and law-abiding country. And the problems of policing in PNG go very deep — it's not just a question of too few police with too few skills.

Go to the average police station in PNG and you will see what I mean. Many have no phones and no vehicles. Pay is irregular and housing is atrocious. This is not because PNG is too poor to afford an effective police force, nor because its officers know no better. It is because a deeply dysfunctional system of government lacks the administrative capacity and budget discipline to effectively spend the money that should be available.

The same problems afflict most other sectors of government in PNG. The problems in policing, in education, health care, road maintenance and economic policy are all symptoms of a much deeper weakness in the institutions of government in PNG. And the pervasive weakness of the state in PNG is in turn a symptom of something even deeper — a weak sense of nationhood.

The idea of PNG as a nation has never struck deep roots with PNG's population. That matters, because without a sense of a shared national interest among voters, PNG's vibrant but chaotic democracy cannot deliver responsible national government. And it sets up a cycle of disenchantment and despair.

PNG's weak government does little for its people, so there is no reason for them to offer it a commitment in return. Public servants have little reason to put the interests of the state above those of their community or family. Politicians come to see politics as a form of business. And the resulting corruption makes people even more cynical about their country.

These problems have deep roots. They were there before independence in 1975, when people who cared deeply about PNG warned that a weak sense of nationhood would undermine its future. And they are shared with other countries in which, like PNG, the structures of the nation-state have been grafted onto societies with no previous experience of statehood.

The question for Australia is: What can we do to help PNG tackle these deep-seated problems? We know that aid alone cannot be the answer. Australia has poured money into PNG for 30 years and it has done a lot to slow PNG's decline and help its people. But traditional aid cannot build the basic institutional and psychological infrastructure of a functioning state.

The Australian Government's new "Pacific aid strategy", published last week, speaks of "a fundamental shift" to "a more hands-on approach", which sound like steps in the right direction. The Government seems to understand how deep-seated PNG's problems are. But the measures it proposes are rather timid — more advisers, more technical assistance, more support for accountability. These do not seem enough to help PNG confront problems that go to the heart of its nationhood.

If Australia is serious about helping PNG to pull out of the long, slow decline of the past three decades, we need to find ways to help it tackle the deeper problems of a weak nation. Unless we are happy to see PNG collapse, we have no alternative but to try — because there is no reason to believe PNG can turn itself around without a lot of help. But there is no model anywhere in the world for how one country can help another to overcome these fundamental issues.

However, we can identify some basic principles to start with. It's going to be a long process — measured not in years but in generations. We need to work with PNG's leaders, not against them. To do that we need to strengthen the government-to-government relationship and also rebuild the wider links between Papua New Guineans and Australians. We need to take a comprehensive approach that helps PNG confront problems at all levels — service delivery, central administration, economic development, constitutional issues, political processes and national identity.

So Australia needs to work with PNG to deliver a generational agenda that can build the economy and the nation. And we need to start by rebuilding the bilateral relationship. The way to begin is for the two governments to agree to set this ambitious goal for the relationship, and to begin a broad-based process of consultation on both sides of the Torres Strait to bring it about.

Australia's interests and responsibilities in our immediate neighbourhood have always been at the heart of John Howard's foreign policy and his actions in Bougainville, East Timor and the Solomon Islands. PNG confronts him, and the rest of us, with our biggest challenge.

There is little place for poetry in foreign policy, but poet James McAuley was on to something when he said: "I have felt that New Guinea would be a test of our quality as a nation: that something worthwhile could be created there; and on the other hand that failure could come through lack of foresight, sympathy and clear principles of action."

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