

Hugh White
Pacific Plan puts Howard to the test
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Be careful what you wish for. Two years ago John Howard went to Auckland to tell the leaders of the South Pacific to take a hard look at their collective future. They agreed and developed a Pacific Plan, which could one day become the stepping stone to a regional confederation among Australia and its small neighbours.

Now Howard faces a test: if he is serious about Pacific integration, he must allow Pacific Islanders to come and work in Australia on short-term visas.

He does not have long to decide. On October 26, the Pacific Plan will be put to the annual Pacific Island Forum Summit in Papua New Guinea. It is an ambitious 10-year blueprint for closer co-operation and integration between South Pacific countries. It aims to promote economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security throughout the region. Greater labour mobility is one of its key provisions.

The Pacific Plan is a direct result of Howard's diplomacy. Along with New Zealand's Helen Clark, he urged the Pacific's leaders to consider whether their states could survive, and deliver a reasonable quality of life, without pooling their efforts in some kind of shared regional governance.

This is definitely the right question to be asking. Forty years after the first colonial flags came down, no one could say that the experiment of breaking the Pacific up into more than a dozen mostly tiny countries has been a success. Some are smaller than an Australian municipality, yet each has had to try to develop the machinery of a full-scale state, and overcome the challenges of remoteness, poor resource endowment, immature political systems and a narrow skills base. No one should be surprised that they have struggled.

By developing the Pacific Plan, our neighbours have shown that they take the problems seriously and are prepared to look at fairly radical solutions. But it is not the only bold plan around right now. The ALP's Pacific Island spokesman, Bob Sercombe, has published a policy discussion paper on the Pacific. It contains detailed ideas and proposals that go much further than the Pacific Plan in setting out the basic design of what it calls a Pacific Community. They include an over-arching Pacific Treaty to create legally binding obligations on members to meet agreed goals. They also include a Pacific Parliament and a Pacific Court, the establishment of a Pacific Common Market, monetary co-operation and integration, and formalised security co-operation.

These are bold ideas. Wisely, Sercombe put a lot of effort into talking them over with Pacific Island leaders before he went to print. Interestingly, he received positive responses from many regional leaders including PNG's Foreign Minister, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, and former prime minister Sir Mekere Morauta, and Vanuatu's Prime Minister Ham Lini. Their response suggests that his vision of a Pacific Community is at least on the table for discussion. Closer Pacific regionalism — even eventual confederation — may be an idea whose time has come. The forum's Pacific Plan is the first step.

But is Australia ready? Perhaps not. Once among the leaders, the Government now seems to be having second thoughts — especially on the key question of labour mobility, which is likely to become the touchstone of Australian commitment to a new future for the Pacific, and the focus of discussions about the Pacific Plan later this month.

For years, Pacific leaders have argued that Australia could best help its neighbours by opening our job market to Pacific Islanders, allowing them to come here to work on short-term visas. Island economies would be bolstered by the money they would send home and by the skills they would take back. And they would ease labour shortages in key Australian industries.

The idea has never got off the ground here until recently. But now, thanks to broader understanding of the problems of the Pacific — and a tight domestic labour market — it is attracting widespread support, from some surprising quarters. That includes not just potential employers, but the 2003 Senate committee report, Bob Sercombe's ALP policy paper, and even (conditionally) the ACTU.

So far, however, the Government is resistant. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone have spoken against the idea recently. This seems strange in a Government committed to free and open labour markets. But it seems even stranger in a Government that is committed to Australia's leadership role in the Pacific; that understands the huge interest we have in anything that will improve our neighbours' long-term viability; and that has taken the lead in promoting regional integration.

Island leaders see Australia's willingness to allow labour mobility as critical to the concept of Pacific integration, and an Australian refusal would quite probably derail the whole process. Inevitably, any Pacific Community would be led by Australia, and result in a region even more dominated by Australia than it is today.

We can hardly be surprised that, as our neighbours contemplate this new future, they look to Australia to show that we are willing to take account of their interests. Labour mobility has become the test of our bona fides as the leader of a Pacific Community. We would be mugs to fail the test, because if this month's opportunity passes, we may not get another for a long time. Any long-term solution to the immediate problems we face in places like PNG and the Solomon Islands will need a strong element of regional integration. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

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