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**The deep mess of PNG demands long-term action**

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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 we want 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, 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 ministers, led by Alexander Downer, will meet their PNG counterparts to talk about the future of the relationship. They have some good news to celebrate.

After a year of legal and political wrangling, the Enhanced Co-operation Program agreed at last year's forum has got into gear. Two weeks ago, the first Australian police went on the beat in PNG to help address the country's endemic law and order problems.

But let's be realistic. Two hundred or so Australian police will not turn PNG into a safe and law-abiding country. At any time there will be fewer than a dozen on the beat. 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 because a deeply dysfunctional system of government lacks the administrative capacity and budget discipline to spend the money that should be available effectively.

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

The idea of PNG as a nation and a state has never struck deep roots with its population. Without a sense of a shared national interest among voters, a vibrant but chaotic democracy cannot deliver responsible government. And it sets up a corrosive cycle of disenchantment and despair.

PNG's weak government does little for its people, so there is no reason for them to offer it commitment in return. Politicians come to see politics as a form of business. The resulting corruption and maladministration make 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, like this newspaper's Peter Hastings, warned that a weak sense of nationhood would undermine its future. And they are shared with other countries, in the South Pacific and beyond, in which the structures of the nation-state have been grafted onto societies with no previous experience of statehood.

What can Australia do to help PNG? 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 the country's decline

and help its people. But traditional aid cannot build the institutional and psychological infrastructure of a functioning state.

The Government's Pacific Aid Strategy, published last week, speaks of "a fundamental shift" to "a more hands-on approach", which sounds like a step 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.

If Australia is serious about helping PNG to pull out of its painful decline, we need to find ways to help it tackle the deeper problems of a weak state and a weak nation. We have no alternative but to try, because there is no reason to believe PNG can turn itself around without a lot of help.

There is no model for how one country can help another in this way. However, we can identify some basic principles. It's going to take a long time — not in years, but in generations. We need to work with PNG and its leaders, not against them. To do that we need to build a deeper and more trusting relationship — to strengthen the government-to-government relationship but also rebuild the wider links between Papua New Guineans and Australians.

We need to take a comprehensive approach that helps PNG address service delivery, central administration, economic development, constitutional issues, political processes and national identity.

So the two countries need to work together to conceive, construct and deliver a long-term agenda that can build PNG's economy, the state 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 consult widely on both sides of 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 the 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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