Whose Oceania? Contending visions of community in Pacific region-building

GREG FRY

October 2004
Department of International Relations

Working Papers

The Department’s Working Paper series provides readers with access to current research on international relations. Reflecting the Department’s intellectual profile, the series includes topics on the general theoretical and empirical study of international and global politics, the political dynamics and developments in the Asia–Pacific region, and the intersection between the two.

Publication as a ‘Working Paper’ does not preclude subsequent publication in scholarly journals or books, indeed it may facilitate publication by providing feedback from readers to authors.

Unless otherwise stated, publications of the Department of International Relations are presented without endorsement as contributions to the public record and debate. Authors are responsible for their own analysis and conclusions.
Whose Oceania? Contending visions of community in Pacific region-building

GREG FRY

A loss of faith in the post-colonial state—now often seen as non-viable, failed or failing—has encouraged many influential governments and commentators to shift their quest for answers to the question ‘what now for good governance in the Pacific?’ to the regional level. Although the basic thrust of outside assistance and the commitment of island governments still remains focused on rebuilding or sustaining the centralised state, increasingly ‘good governance’ is viewed as only being possible within the context of a revitalised and more deeply integrated regional political community. The regional level is seen as having the potential to moderate the excesses of national governance through establishing obligations to regional norms about good governance and economic management. It is also seen as having the potential to assist in resolving conflict, to increase the economic viability of the smaller states through the pooling of limited resources, and to provide a cordon sanitaire against terrorism.

The new faith in a regional answer to the national governance problem has been reflected in a spate of high profile proposals concerned with redefining the regional political community of Oceania in significant ways. One proposal, emanating from an Australian Senate Committee, but also put forward in various forms by some Australian journalists and

1 Director of Studies, Graduate Studies in International Affairs, and Hedley Bull Fellow, Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Redefining the Pacific: Regionalism—Past, Present, and Future, 39th University of Otago Foreign Policy School, Dunedin, 25–28 June 2004.

2 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, A Pacific engaged: Australia’s relations with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the south-west Pacific (Canberra: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, August 2003), chapters 1 and 3; Senator Peter Cook, ‘Address to the ANU Pacific Younger Scholars Week’, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 4 February 2004.
academics, is for a Pacific political and economic community. In the public commentary this proposal has conjured up ideas of a European Union-style regional community for the Pacific and is referred to by some journalists as a proposal for Pacific Union.

A second kind of proposal for change has been promoted by the Howard government as part of its new hands-on policy approach to the Pacific since mid-2003. This approach involves not only a commitment to what Foreign Minister Alexander Downer refers to as ‘cooperative intervention’ in Solomon Islands, and to the insertion of in-line managers and police in Papua New Guinea and Nauru; but also a commitment to a more effective regional approach led by Australia. Its vision is of a revitalised Pacific Islands Forum (PIF—managed by an Australian) with greater powers to intervene in state sovereignty and to impose obligations on member states to conform to regional norms and positions. This new commitment to a more effective regional effort is explicitly motivated by a security imperative—the war against terror—and has to be seen as part of the Howard government’s new doctrinal approach to the Pacific underpinned by its view that Australia has a ‘special responsibility’ to look after ‘our patch’ defined in this context as the Pacific islands region.

A third proposal was put forward by an Eminent Persons’ Group (EPG) tasked by the 2003 Forum to review the Pacific Islands Forum. This has become the most important proposal because it has now been accepted—in the signing of the Auckland Declaration in April 2004—as the basis of future discussions by all Pacific Island Forum member countries including Australia and New Zealand. Like the Australian proposal it does not seek


a Pacific Union but it does propose much deeper regional integration and a rethinking of the ‘Pacific way’ to meet new challenges of governance. Its motives are less driven by security concerns as by the challenges of good governance, peoples’ welfare and concerns with wide participation in a regional community. This position seems also to have been held by the New Zealand government and commentators who did not embrace either the more radical forms of Australia-centric community of the Senate Committee or the ‘war against terror’ arguments underpinning Canberra’s position. As chair of the Forum, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clarke made it clear that she wanted a more pro-active Secretary General in a crisis and radical restructuring if the Pacific is not to become ‘a ghetto of conflict and poverty’.6

These three proposals have become confused in the public commentary. There has been a tendency to represent the various Australian proposals, and even the New Zealand Prime Minister’s position prior to the Forum, as one of supporting a move towards a Pacific Community modelled on the European Community.7 The Australian government has denied this. After the Auckland Forum, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard was reported as saying that: ‘talk of a Pacific Union was premature: “It’s counter-productive and it achieves nothing to be talking in those sort of grandiose terms … Let us crawl before we walk”’.8 And the Eminent Persons’ Group report made it clear that although it was not ruling out such a Pacific Union as a long-term goal, the immediate concerns were making the Pacific Islands Forum more effective. There is clearly no intention at this stage on the part of Australia, New Zealand or Pacific Island governments to move to a Political and Economic Community modelled on the European Community.

While the signing of the Auckland Declaration at one level suggests a settlement on the question of what form the redefinition of the Pacific will

---

take, it remains an important exercise in my view to explore the implications of all three proposals mentioned above. The Australian government is obviously a key player in region-building and in its present mood sees itself as having the ‘responsibility’ to manage things in ‘our patch’. The flesh has yet to be put on the bones of the Pacific plan recommended by the Eminent Persons’ Group, a process in which the Australian position will be influential. There are also some who see the EPG report as already satisfying the key objectives of the Australian push for regional reform\(^9\) suggesting the need to examine the differences between the two. The more radical proposal of the bipartisan Senate Committee reflects a broader canvassing of Australian opinion and could become the basis of a Labor government’s approach to region-building. Stripped of its controversial ‘one regional currency’ (the Australian dollar) and ‘one regional labour market’ arguments the Senate Committee’s proposed Pacific community is not that much different from where the current regional arrangements are heading in the Forum, even without the EPG review.

THE LEGITIMACY QUESTION

The particular concern of this paper is the question of the moral and political legitimacy of contending visions of community contained in these region-building proposals. The legitimacy of the post-colonial state is the key issue at the national level of governance in the Pacific,\(^{10}\) it should also be seen as central when regional forms of governance are being defined or redefined. Lacking the coercive and socialising powers of the state, the regional political community is even more dependent on legitimacy as the basis of its political and moral authority. ‘Legitimacy’ takes us not only to questions of justice (whether a particular form of region-building is seen as denying the rights of particular groups for example) but also to questions of sustainability and order (whether a proposed form of region-building is likely to gain political acceptance by those affected by it). By legitimacy, then, I am not referring to the legal authority of the soft law associated with


declarations and treaties (or indeed of hard law if a more radical form of integrated community were formed) or the legal authority of the founding processes engaged in by sovereign states but rather the acceptance and recognition of the moral and political authority of the regional political community by the people who are subject to it.

The 35 years of region-building in the post-colonial Pacific and the 25 years of the late colonial period before it, suggests what questions we should focus on to judge the political and moral legitimacy of proposals for future Oceanic community. From this experience I contend that the legitimacy question turns on what and who is excluded (and included), and on what grounds, in a particular conception of community. The first is what does it stand for as a set of values, practices and ideas? At stake here is the key issue of how should Pacific islanders live their lives? For example, how should they be organised economically? What constitutes a secure community? What should their relationship be to the land? What should the moral obligation be to other Pacific islanders living under colonialism or repression? The second question is, who should be regarded as belonging to the community and on what basis? And third, who can speak for it and determine its practices?

Ultimately the answers to the first and second questions are derived from the answer to the third—who controls the idea of Oceania and claims to speak for it? I therefore propose to focus on this question in exploring the legitimacy question in relation to the current attempts to redefine regional community. In the post-colonial Pacific context this question is very pertinent. It has been at the centre of the struggle over the legitimacy of various forms of Pacific community for over 60 years. It has centred on a debate about the self-determination of Pacific societies and its flipside, a debate about hegemonic regionalism (whether seen as colonial or neo-colonial) concerning the role of colonial powers, ex-colonial powers and other outside forces, but particularly of Australia, in defining what the Pacific should stand for as an idea. As importantly, it has also involved a debate among Pacific islanders about who represents the ‘self’ in regional self-determination. The rights of state elites to be the only group to speak for the regional community has been challenged over several decades by non-governmental organisations, sovereignty movements, the leaders of dependent territories, and women’s groups.
LEGITIMACY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The establishment of the South Pacific Forum in 1971 was the most sophisticated institutional expression of a post-colonial vision of regional community built on self-determination principles. The Pacific leaders were strongly supported in this new effort at region-building by New Zealand, and with slightly less enthusiasm, by Australia. To underscore the self-determination principle, it was not enough that the Forum overcome the constraints on political discussions in the South Pacific Commission, or that it be structured in such a way that there was equality among members; it was also regarded as essential that only sovereign island states, and Australia and New Zealand, be allowed to participate, thus excluding the dependent territories and the other metropolitan powers, France, Britain and the United States.

Although the basis of the claimed legitimacy of the new regionalism was the entrenchment of this self-determination principle, this by no means resolved the contest over the question who is the regional community for? And who speaks for it? In the subsequent three decades there have been many challenges to this interpretation of regional self-determination and therefore to the legitimacy of this vision of regional governance.

One set of challenges has come from within the Island Pacific over the question of whether the definition of ‘self’ in self-determination is inclusive enough. The emergence of this dominant vision of regional community in the late 1960s and early 1970s was accompanied by the promotion of a ‘Pacific way’ ideology among Pacific leaders. This was soon challenged by other Pacific islanders as being an exclusivist vision of Pacific cultural identity and as acting to entrench male chiefly rule. It was also seen as excluding the largest ethnic group in the Pacific at that time, the Indo-Fijians. Challenges also came from sovereignty and independence movements in Hawaii, New Caledonia and West Papua, and from the leaders of dependent territories such as French Polynesia, for not being recognised as having a right to participate in the determination of what the regional community should come to represent.

Another set of challenges has come from the non-government sector. They challenge the state-centrism of Pacific regionalism. They have preferred a vision of community that embraces representatives of society as well as of the state. They also have a different vision of what the Pacific community should stand for in relation to key issues such as economic development, environmental protection, and security. Moreover they see a different regional boundary that incorporates West Papua and perhaps New Zealand. A particular challenge from the non-government sector has come from women’s groups who have criticised the male domination of regional decision making. This was graphically demonstrated at the 1980 South Pacific Conference in Port Moresby when a large group of women staged a demonstration outside the conference and waved placards saying, in effect, ‘where are the women?’

Another focal point for contests over self-determination affecting the legitimacy of the existing regional vision as expressed in the Forum model has come from the intermittent attempt by the Australian government to reinterpret the original Forum vision to one in which there is a hierarchy in the community membership with Australia, and sometimes New Zealand, seen as first class citizens and having to exercise a ‘special responsibility’ to manage or lead the Forum agenda and to sometimes move outside the Forum to determine what the region stands for. This impetus was particularly evident from 1976 to 1980, and in 1984–88, as a result of Australia’s Cold War concerns, and again in 1994–96 around the effort of the Keating government to impose a World Bank model of development on the region. It has been evident again since 2002 to the present day in relation to an attempt by the Howard government to create a ‘Pacific solution’ to its asylum seeker problem and a regional security order around issues of anti-terrorism.

These attempts to redefine the relationship between the state members of the regional community created problems for the legitimacy of the redefinitions of the Pacific imposed by Canberra, a point recognised by Gareth Evans’ doctrine of ‘constructive commitment’ in 1989, after a decade in which the legitimacy of an Australian-imposed idea of a regional...

12 Personal observations at South Pacific Conference, Port Moresby, 1980.
security community came under strong challenge from the island states. These attempts to impose a regional order have also been seen as even less legitimate when Australia is seen as representing the ideas and models of community of foreign powers or global agencies, as in the attempt to impose a World Bank view of land ownership in 1994 and, more recently, of responding to Australia’s domestic politics rather than to the communal needs established through Pacific dialogue, or of operating on behalf of the United States in some kind of deputy sheriff role.

Epeli Hau’ofa has put forward a powerful critique of official region-building by a coalition of outsiders, island elites, consultants and academics as ultimately representing hegemonic views that are belittling for Pacific islanders. He puts forward a seemingly romantic notion of a self-determining Oceanic community against the stilted instrumentalism of the elite concept going under the label ‘Pacific islands region’:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.13

As the region considers the new proposals for redefining future Oceanic community we must keep in mind that there is already a form of regional political community in existence and it reflects, as we have seen, the dominance of a state-centric answer to the question ‘who can speak for the region?’ and one, in particular, where Australia seeks a hegemonic role in agenda-setting. The legitimacy of this community has been challenged because some groups feel unrepresented or feel that the self-determination principle needs widening or reinforcing. The challenge also stems from the fact that this perceived exclusion also leads to the exclusion of different answers to the question: what should the regional community stand for as a set of ideas and practices? Regional non-governmental organisations,

---

church groups, women’s groups and environmental groups have generally argued that the answer given by the inner circle of those speaking for the regional community has privileged neoliberal orthodoxies in relation to the conceptualisation of development, and thus has become an agent of globalisation. They also argue that the notion of regional security as defined by this inner group reflects Australian views on behalf of larger powers. But even within the state grouping, the Australian dominance of the agenda is often viewed as skewing the response to the question of what the region should stand for. The regional stance on climate change is an extreme example of this but there are many others.

We are now in a position to turn to a consideration of how current proposals to redefine Oceanic regionalism, and the visions of community they contain, may enter this longstanding contest over self-determination and what the region should stand for, and the implications of this in turn for the legitimacy of this latest attempt at region-building. I consider three models of regional community in particular: that contained in the Australian government’s proposal, put forward since August 2003, to strengthen the Pacific Islands Forum as part of its responsibilities within the ‘war against terror’; the more radical Australian proposals for Pacific Economic Union put forward by a Senate Committee, academics and journalists in late 2003; and the vision of future community implied in the report of the Eminent Persons’ Group of the Pacific Islands Forum in April 2004.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PROPOSAL
The Australian government vision of Pacific community is for a state-centric community of Pacific island states managed by, but not including, Australia. The community should embrace good governance, democracy and neoliberal economic values and harmonise laws around border control in a way that would suit Australia’s security concerns. It calls for greater regional integration in the form of pooling of resources among Pacific island states in such areas as police training and civil aviation. This amounts to a return to the 1970s call for regional integration in the area of economic development and to the 1980s call for regional security defined in ways that were seen as promoting Australian security. It also seeks a community of states in which the obligations entered into by the island member states are more binding on national governments. This is consistent with Australia’s concern to achieve more effective implementation of the Australian-led
regional agenda of the past few years on security and governance (which already has agreement on paper).

The vision of community can then be seen as an extension of the vision implicit in the declarations of the existing Forum. The community should stand for ‘good governance’ and ‘development’ as defined by the World Bank, but there should be a return to regional integration to promote this. The processes of regional community should be changed to give effect to the achievement of existing goals, particularly in relation to economic development and securing the regional borders. Australia and New Zealand are seen as patrons, and not participants, in such a community. Australia nevertheless has a special responsibility to determine the nature of this regional community for those within it. This responsibility is to the international community, and particularly the United States.

This new commitment to region-building is driven by a perceived security imperative associated with the ‘war against terror’. It has to be seen in the context of Prime Minister Howard’s attempt to minimise the Australian commitment of troops to Afghanistan and Iraq since the fall of Baghdad while still appearing as a committed alliance partner with the United States. It was also part of a conceptual shift in policy thinking exemplified in two key reports issued by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) that argue that the region is now to be seen as a set of failed or failing states whose failure could invite terrorist havens that would threaten Australian security interests.14

The change in Australia’s Pacific policy, again paralleling a paradigm shift suggested by ASPI, has been dramatic. The most significant expression of this change in approach concerned the decision to reverse a longstanding and considered policy of non-intervention in Solomon Islands. But also of importance was the Australian government’s decision in December 2003 to radically change the way it engages with Papua New Guinea. The ‘enhanced cooperation package’, or ECP, is a hands-on approach aimed at bolstering law and order and ‘good governance’. It involves the direct

14 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Beyond Bali: ASPI’s strategic assessment 2002 (Canberra: ASPI, 2002); Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Our failing neighbour (Canberra: ASPI, June 2003).
insertion of 250 Australian police and a number of government officials in in-line positions. A third expression of this new doctrine can be seen in the change in Australia’s approach to Nauru in 2004. Australia has insisted on placing its officers in key financial management and police positions in the Nauru government as the condition of receiving further assistance for the bankrupt Nauru economy.

The new commitment to redefining Pacific regionalism has to be seen in the light of this new hands-on engagement. In the context of developing the rationale for the Solomon Islands intervention, Howard promoted the idea of the pooling of regional resources as a means of small non-viable states finding the resources to govern and to avert the longer term economic problems producing state failure. He called specifically for regional integration in civil aviation and police training. Consistent with the hands-on approach at the centre of the new doctrine, Australia has also pushed to have an Australian in charge of the reform process, overthrowing a 30-year convention of a Pacific islander being at the helm of the Pacific Islands Forum. While it is not new for Australia to use regionalism as a vehicle for promoting good governance and ‘war against terror’ objectives, what changed in 2003–04 was the degree of hands-on engagement, not least in the personal involvement of the Australian Prime Minister. Nor was the push for an Australian as Secretary-General a trivial matter, given the symbolism that this position holds in representing the efforts of a past generation of Pacific islanders to decolonise South Pacific regionalism.

The most important aspect of the new push for region-building from Canberra is the return of a very old Australian discourse in relation to the South Pacific, that of ‘special responsibility’. This idea—that Australia has a special responsibility to manage things in the Pacific islands region, a responsibility that is expected of it by distant and powerful friends—is a recurring theme in Howard’s explanation for the new hands-on approach to the Pacific since mid-2003. This self-image as leader and manager recaptures the policy atmosphere of the 1980s and of 1994–96 when this idea last surfaced. It of course raises issues of self-determination for Pacific states and peoples particularly as the Howard government has made no secret of the fact that it is exercising this responsibility on behalf of the Coalition in this part of the world in lieu of heavier deployments to the Middle East.
THE PACIFIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC COMMUNITY PROPOSAL

At about the same time as Mr Howard was announcing his government’s commitment to a strengthened Pacific regionalism through a pooling of resources, a very different model of Oceanic political community emerged as the main recommendation of *A Pacific engaged*, a report by the bipartisan Australian Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee. This is a proposal for a Pacific political and economic community (PPEC). The proposal is for a highly integrated economic community including a free trade area, monetary union (preferably using the Australian dollar) and free labour movement into Australia (although it recommends only a limited pilot scheme in the first instance) and a high degree of obligation for island countries to engage in sound economic management. Although ‘political community’ is also implied in the naming of this proposal it is clearly focused on the economic. There is no mention of a regional parliament, regional confederation or other form of political integration such as joint foreign policy.15

In contrast to the security-driven Australian government proposal, the rationale underlying the Senate Committee proposal is primarily a humanitarian one.16 The objectives are sustainable economic growth, democratic and ethical governance, ‘shared and balanced’ defence and security, and better health, welfare and education. The beliefs driving the proposal are that ‘economic and social problems are worsening’ in the island states; that Australia has a responsibility to assist; and that the best policy approach for Australia to achieve this is to promote or at least study the idea of a fully integrated Pacific economic union. How is a Pacific community to achieve these goals? An enormous weight is put on ‘sustainable regional economic growth’. If such growth is achieved, it is argued, ‘issues of governance, international crime, law and order, regional security and the health and well-being of the people will improve’.17

---

15 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *A Pacific engaged*, chapters 1, 3; Cook, ‘Address to the ANU Pacific Younger Scholars Week’.

16 *A Pacific engaged*, pp. 7–10.

17 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
An equally large burden is put on the answer to the question: how might the Pacific political and economic community achieve this ‘sustainable regional economic growth’? The explicit answer given is through pooling of resources and the imposing of disciplines in economic management on national governments. Mike Moore, former Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), is cited with approval, for example, in observing that:

Studies show that countries preparing for entry to the EU and WTO do better than those without such objectives. The economic discipline brings with it growth, social progress and better governance.\(^\text{18}\)

The Senate Committee’s proposal was clearly influenced by, but further developed the ideas of some key Australian academics and journalists. Donald Denoon, Professor of Pacific History at the Australian National University, for example, argues:

The only way that our region can become more prosperous and harmonious is to revisit and revive the substance (though not the name) of Australasia, acknowledging that the federal compact of 1900 was too narrow to serve the needs of the region. First, we should concede that there is a region and mutual responsibilities within it. What should follow is the creation of a free trade area. Equally necessary is an integrated defence structure. Ultimately the region and its members need something like the European Community, so that currency fluctuations are avoided, capital and technology flow freely, and the benefits of a larger market can be enjoyed. Anything less is simply delaying the collapse of the smaller economies and polities, with catastrophic consequences for Australia and New Zealand.\(^\text{19}\)

And Graeme Dobell, Radio Australia foreign affairs reporter, in an influential public lecture delivered at Parliament House in February 2003, noted that:

To match our security guarantee with an economic guarantee, it’s time for Canberra to advocate the creation of a Pacific Economic Community grouping Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Island states of the Forum and possibly the French Pacific territories … Our purpose is to prevent

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 79.

the disintegration of small societies and fragile states. We need to put a regional floor beneath Pacific economies. Australia and New Zealand need a broadly-based Pacific Community so that their demands for reform and change are not merely dismissed as new forms of colonialism. Labour mobility would give Canberra and Wellington fresh bargaining power to move the regional game in new directions. … Stronger regional structures are needed to give Island states some life support and allow real nation-building.20

All three proposals—that of Dobell, Denoon and the Senate Committee—envisage a community in which there are rights and obligations or ‘mutual responsibilities’. The Senate Committee makes this the ‘central plank’ of its PPEC. It argues that if Australia has an obligation to the region (which the report assumes), and the region has a right to expect Australia to play its role (again assumed), then the region has an obligation to Australia to work towards economic reform and efficiency. The same logic appears to be admired by Dobell in his reference to the success of the EC in getting the Pacific to do what it wants:

Australia should be shamed that the European Union was able to force the Forum Island countries to create an Islands-only free trade grouping. Rattling its aid money, the European Commission demanded the creation of a matching trans-national body so it could more easily conduct its business through the Forum Secretariat in Suva. The EU Aid Commissioner toured the region last October telling the Islands that small is not beautiful, small is ridiculous in economic terms. If the EU can move the Pacific to embrace an economic concept that delivers little real benefit to the Islands (and one they’ve resisted for 30 years) then Australia and New Zealand should become bolder about creating a regional community that could actually do some good.21

The problem is that this sounds more like imposing aid conditionality rather than forming the basis of a sustainable social contract for building a community. Under this suggestion, Australia determines who has responsibility to whom and does so on the basis of ‘rattling its aid money’, to use Dobell’s phrase, or offering some labour access. All three proposals are highly Australia-centric. They see an Australian hub with a series of

21  Ibid., p. 21.
spokes rather than a regional community in which Australia happens to be the biggest member. In this respect the community is to be built for Pacific island societies but on Australian terms.

Nevertheless, these three proposals appear more able to gain legitimacy than the Howard government’s vision, because the primary motivation is at least to assist the Pacific rather than secure Australia. There is also at least some opening up of Australia into the community. Furthermore in the case of Dobell and the Senate Committee, the proposals are put forward in the context of making the case for more people-to-people contacts between the Pacific and Australia, and for education of Australians on Pacific matters. While their regional community concept is still one of a ‘community of states’ it crosses a line into a broader notion of community with this link to society.

THE PACIFIC EMINENT PERSONS’ GROUP PROPOSAL

The third prominent vision of future Pacific community grew out of an Australian and New Zealand push for more effective regionalism at the Auckland Forum in August 2003. It is important to note that the Australian push reflected the Howard government position outlined above, and not that of the Senate Committee. *A Pacific engaged* had been released around the same time, and confused reporting of the Australian position at the Auckland Forum. As we have seen, the Australian government was concerned with tightening up regionalism as part of its responsibility to manage ‘our patch’ in the war against terror. Prime Minister Howard went to the Auckland Forum with the intention of promoting further pooling of resources at the regional level particularly in the area of police training and civil aviation as well as a tightening up of the processes and management of the Pacific Islands Forum (including the insertion of an Australian in the top regional post, running the PIF Secretariat). The position of New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Helen Clarke, while obviously not embracing the ideas of Australia’s ‘special responsibility’ was also concerned to create a much more effective Forum to confront the issues that her government had been very active in assisting in recent years: development, law and order, and conflict situations.

In the event, the other Pacific leaders agreed to this agenda. As well as support in principle for police training and civil aviation, they agreed to set up an Eminent Persons’ Group to conduct the first comprehensive review of
The EPG was chaired by Sir Julius Chan, former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, and comprised several prominent members: Dr Langi Kavaliku of the Kingdom of Tonga, Teburoro Tito, former President of Kiribati, Maiava Iulai Toma, the Samoan Ombudsman, and Robert Cotton, a former Australian diplomat. It consulted widely in the Pacific states at both government and civil society levels. Reflecting the perceived urgency to act, particularly as seen by Forum chair, Helen Clarke, it reported to a special Forum summit in Auckland in April 2004. What was before the leaders was a proposal for future directions and an outline of the principles on which a future Pacific ‘community of states’ should be based. A vision statement outlined the general concept; its implementation awaited the filling out of a Pacific Plan to be developed before the next Forum. The April Forum agreed to the EPG report and its vision statement in the Auckland Declaration.

While this EPG proposal grew out of an Australian and New Zealand effort to tighten up the Forum’s regional activities, it contains a significantly different vision of regional community than that implicit in the Australian position in particular (although it may be closer to that of the New Zealand government). I therefore wish to take a different tack to those who see the EPG report as simply a reflection of Australian government interests. The Sydney Morning Herald’s Mark Metherell, for example, interpreted the acceptance of the EPG report by the Pacific leaders as:

Pacific leaders have agreed to more integration with Australia in return for more help to counter the economic and political disintegration of their struggling countries.

The EPG’s conception of regional community has to be seen within the parameters of their brief. Their task was to review the Pacific Islands

---

22 Forum Communique, 34th meeting, Auckland, August 2003.

23 As in the establishment of the Forum itself, New Zealand played an important role in supporting the development of the EPG vision and the chair of the EPG singles out the New Zealand Prime Minister, observing that ‘The Review was inspired by an insightful presentation right at the start by the Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Rt Hon Helen Clarke’. See Statement by Rt Hon Sir Julius Chan GCMG, KBE, Chair of the Eminent Persons’ Group, Pacific Islands Forum Review, March 2004, <www.mfat.govt.nz/foreign/regions/pacific/pif03/pifreviewdocs/chair.html>.

24 Metherell, ‘Pacific nations agree to closer ties’.
Forum. Their starting point was therefore very different from the Australian Senate Committee who began with a clean slate and came up with what they thought was an ideal regional community rather than beginning with what was there already. Their finishing point was also, not surprisingly, quite distinct. Nevertheless, while not advocating a highly integrated Pacific economic community, the EPG did not rule out such a community in the future. It observed that a Pacific economic union was in fact one of the earliest goals of the Forum and that it is ‘a vision that remains incomplete, though still a relevant objective’. The Pacific leaders signing onto the vision contained in the report also made it clear that the time was not yet ripe for a Pacific Union.

The EPG nevertheless opts for a conception of community that goes beyond that implicit in the current Forum activities. First, it envisions a community of states engaged in ‘deep integration’ (by implication a higher level of integration than currently attempted) and greater cooperation in such areas as transport, information technology, quarantine, customs, security, judicial and public administration, and regional law enforcement. Second, it promotes the idea of a more proactive Secretary-General able to act to mobilise the community to assist in times of regional crisis including within a member state. This amounts to a gentle push across the line of state sovereignty. Third, while seeing the community as a ‘community of states’, it nevertheless promotes the participation of dependent territories, civil society groups such as women’s groups, youth and churches in regional deliberations, and introduces the notion of ‘peoples of the region’. Fourth, it seeks to settle the question of the legitimacy of Australian and New Zealand membership of the community but also to place a check on any aspirations to hegemonic relations between members:

It is time to put aside suspicions and differences by explicitly recognising that we are all—whether from Small Island States or more prosperous Australia and New Zealand—peoples of the region. We are political partners and are equal members of the Forum.

---

25 EPG, ‘Pacific cooperation’, p. 27.
26 Statement by Chan.
In terms of the relationship with the Australian conception of regional community, we should particularly note that although the EPG vision shares the purposes of security and development in a region, it is concerned to introduce Pacific heritage and cultural identity as a guiding principle of community. The emphasis on a community of peoples as well as states also seems to suggest a departure from the Australian conception that is state-centric and instrumentalist. The process by which this conception was arrived at is also important. The EPG report is justly proud of the wide consultation that was involved and describes the resultant recommendations accordingly as representing ‘authentic Pacific opinion’.

CONCLUSION

Past experience would suggest that the Eminent Persons’ Group vision of future Pacific community has the most potential to gain the support of the Pacific states and other segments of Pacific society. It reinforces the equal place at the table where decisions are made for all states regardless of size, a principle which disciplines the larger states as well as seeking to assure the smaller states, at the same time as promoting a more inclusive community. While still state-centric in its conception of community, it talks about an opening up to regional civil society on the one hand and to the dependent territories on the other. It also introduces a more balanced list of community concerns than the Australian proposals, and introduces protection of cultural heritage as an equally important purpose of the regional community. It is a vision that has been derived from extensive consultation with all sectors of society in all member states, and therefore has the possibility of going some of the way to meet the concerns of those who felt excluded in the past.

In practice there is a danger that this more inclusive vision of the EPG will be hijacked by an Australian government intent on promoting its ‘special responsibility’ to manage the region in the ‘war on terror’. It is of course quite acceptable for Australia to have concerns about security and its links to development and governance in the post-colonial states in the Pacific. The difficulty begins, as in the past, when Australia arrogates to itself the right to determine the agenda and values of the Pacific community on behalf of the West, the United States or the international community, or just in terms of its own domestic political requirements. This may eventually lead to a lack of support among the island state members for the Australian-led agenda as it did in the 1980s and 1994–96. And in the meantime the adoption of an Australian agenda may alienate the non-state
actors whose participation is required if there is to be room for a debate on the main assumptions of regional community visions about neoliberal development as the panacea for conflict resolution, good governance and security.

There is also the problem that the Australian vision does not include Australia as part of the regional community, and yet Australia wants to determine the values and purposes of that community. While it continues to do this, the regional community will lack legitimacy and be quietly challenged by those within it. In this regard the Senate Committee report and others concerned with a more integrated Pacific Union offer a more hopeful vision. They not only place Australia within an integrated region; they also recognise the need for people-to-people contact and for the education of Australians, if a regional community is to be based on a feeling of identity.