

Confessions of an adviser

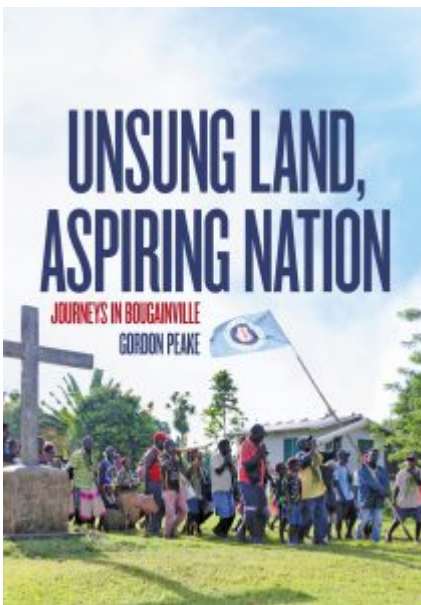
by Stephen Howes

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Pro-independence t-shirts on sale at Bel Isi Park, Buka, Bougainville, 2019

Photo Credit: Gordon Peake



Gordon Peake's marvellous new book *Unsung Land, Aspiring Nation* is based on the four years he spent in Bougainville as an Australian aid-funded adviser, from 2016 to 2019. It is both entertaining and insightful.

Peake is a brilliant writer. He writes movingly about Arawa, Bougainville's once booming, now decaying mining town. A major preoccupation is Beatrice Blackwood, the pioneering British anthropologist who spent 18 months in Bougainville around 1930, and whose 600-page book, letters and adventures are brought back to life for us.

And yet, for all its fascinating and often amusing accounts and anecdotes, *Unsung Land* is a disturbing read. The author's job was to help the Bougainville government "draw down" those powers the national Papua New Guinean government has already (in fact long ago) agreed it could have. Despite its aspirations for independence, the Bougainville government is not interested in the business of draw down, and Peake is not sure what he is achieving. "[W]e were here to help, but were we helping?", he asks forlornly at one point. Other programs of support to Bougainville that delivered more tangible help, such as grants for water and sanitation projects, "seemed to be faring much better in terms of impact and

effectiveness” than the advisory work he was engaged in.

Peake writes illuminatingly and convincingly about the theory of adviser effectiveness, saying that one can only be effective “when paired with something else”, namely someone who actually wants the advice, and is able to act on it. Such pairings were almost completely missing in Bougainville. The government was “stone-broke” and “inert”. There were “[p]rofound structural issues with the public service”, to the extent that “it was difficult to locate people to work with”.

Towards the end of the book, Peake defends the sort of advisory work he does as “long-haul, much needed, foundational but unheralded”. But it is hard to see a strong basis for this positive assessment in the pages that precede it.

The bottom line is that there just isn’t political interest in effective government in Bougainville. In such a scenario, “trying to conjure up a government through the production of ever more complex plans and detailed policies” – the work of the team of 15 that Peake was part of – is a recipe only for frustration and failure.

The lack of interest in building an effective state in Bougainville is linked, Peake suggests, to the region’s social structure, and the pre-eminence of its clans. In Bougainville, as in the rest of PNG, politicians are elected not on the basis of national (or regional) policy but on local issues. Without political support for state building, that project will flounder.

The paradox that arises is why, if all politics is so local, support for independence is so strong. If, as Peake concludes, independence will not make a material difference to the lives of Bougainvilleans, why did 98.3% of them vote for it in the 2019 referendum? There must surely be a strong Bougainvillean identity, but not one that is strong enough to support nation building.

Peake’s take on Bougainville, like his take on technical assistance, is affectionate but again downbeat. Normally disillusionment follows independence; in the case of Bougainville, the move to independence has taken so long that this sequence has been reversed. 15 years of “cheerless peace” have passed since the end of the civil war. A “pensive sadness” covers much of the region. The administration is already bogged down in corruption, and disputes over corruption.

Peake emphasises the lack of international support for Bougainville’s independence as a cause for the slow progress towards it, but it seems to me that the more important factor is that PNG doesn’t want Bougainville to break away, and it is unclear which side will prevail. Even if independence seems inevitable after the overwhelming yes vote, no one knows when it will be – it could take another 20 years. In this context of great uncertainty, the best option for other countries is to

stay neutral.

I have said that this book is downbeat, but I would also say that it is honest. In this regard, the author has done us all a great favour. I am not against the use of technical assistance in aid, but the question does need to be asked whether the environment in which the advisers would be or are working is conducive to that work making a difference. In many contexts, including in Bougainville, it clearly is not.

Given this, when Peake writes that Australian support to Bougainville has, since he left, shifted away from advisory to “the support of organisations in Bougainville that provide practical assistance”, it sounds like a move in the right direction to me. And yet this is hardly a general trend. Australia’s new government is preparing a new aid policy, but it has already declared that the first focus of this policy will be “**building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development**”. The lack of realism in this goal will be evident to anyone who reads *Unsung Land*. It is a book to be read for enjoyment, for understanding, and for better aid policy.

Postscript: *I had written this review when I came across an Abt Associates invitation to tender to provide aid-funded training for Bougainvillian public servants and MPs, both in Bougainville and in Australia. The intent of the training is to “develop a cadre of ethical and accountable leaders that have the capability (and the motivation) to collaborate, lead and manage the delivery of equitable government services to all citizens of Bougainville”. And so it goes. Peake comments at one point in his book that “the lure of the [aid-funded] trip... sometimes felt like the defining impetus behind bureaucratic decision making” in Bougainville.*

98.3% of valid votes in the Bougainville referendum supported independence; that was 97.7% of the total votes cast.

*Gordon Peake’s *Unsung Land, Aspiring Nation: Journeys in Bougainville* is **free to download at ANU Press**.*

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