

Getting realistic about the South Pacific

by James Batley

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Australia has a see-sawing history of engagement with the South Pacific (Photo credit: jmettraux/Flickr/CC BY 2.0)

Advocates of stronger and more effective [Australian engagement in the South Pacific](#) face a couple of entrenched structural challenges. First, the region is hardly critical to Australia's economic future — the South Pacific accounts for a mere **1.3%** of Australia's total trade in goods and services. And Papua New Guinea represents well over half of that, meaning that all the rest of the Pacific islands add up to just over half of one percent of our total trade.

In terms of investment, the South Pacific is even more marginal. Papua New Guinea accounts for 0.8% of the total stock of Australian investment overseas, and Fiji — the next in line in the region — a tiny 0.06%.

A second factor is the relatively small size of the population in Australia originating from the South Pacific. The 2016 census **showed** that this group is growing at a fast rate but, at around 200,000 people, it still represents less than one percent of the total. Moreover, the Pacific islands population in Australia is heavily dominated by Polynesian communities. Our nearest Melanesian neighbours — Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu — are seriously under-represented. It's a surprising fact that, according to the census, in 2016 more people in Australia claimed Cook Islands ancestry (over 22,000) than claimed ancestry from PNG (under 19,000), particularly given that PNG's population is around 500 times the size of the Cook Islands'.

That's not to say that there aren't reasons for Australian governments to pay attention to the region. But taken together, these two structural challenges mean that, despite its proximity and abiding strategic relevance, the South Pacific has often struggled to gain traction as a priority in government. No Pacific islands lobby group, whether business- or community-based, carries much weight in Canberra's corridors. No politician risks losing their seat over South Pacific-related issues.

Over the years, this has left Australia's policy on the South Pacific vulnerable to

swings between neglect (benign or otherwise) on the one hand, and sudden crisis-driven interest on the other.

Arguably, we're currently going through an example of the latter phenomenon in response to the disruptive emergence of China as a player in the region. 'Arguably' only because Australian policymakers would claim that the current government's Pacific 'step up' was in gestation (and indeed, was announced in the 2017 [Foreign Policy White Paper](#)) well before this year's [intense media focus](#) on China's role and influence in the South Pacific.

There may be a sliver of truth in that, but even if it's conceded, there seems no doubt that the 'step up' has been turbo-charged in response to anxiety over Chinese intentions in the region. It might also be noted that the New Zealand government has [made no bones about](#) linking its own Pacific 'reset', which came after Australia's 'step up', to concerns about China in the region.

Is there any guarantee that Australia's 'step up' is sustainable over the long term, and that it's not just another episode in Australia's see-sawing history of engagement in the region? Perhaps the China factor will prove to be a long-term — indeed a structural — spur to greater and more sensitive Australian engagement in the region.

But how else might that engagement be fostered and grown? This is where, to my mind, appeals from some commentators [for thinking 'outside the box'](#) can take on something of a plaintive and, frankly at times unhelpful, quality. No doubt Australia's relationships with the Pacific islands would be less complicated if it radically changed its policy on climate change. But that's simply to ignore political reality in Australia — not to mention that even under an alternative government, it's likely that serious daylight would remain between Australia's position and that of several Pacific island governments. Equally, calls for governments or MPs simply to 'pay more attention' to the South Pacific, while worthy, generally founder on the hard rocks of electoral reality.

That's not to say that we shouldn't be open to new ideas about our relationships in the South Pacific. But the 'step up' does provide a useful platform on which to build future initiatives. In itself, incrementalism isn't necessarily a bad thing, not least if it means a steady and long-term commitment on our part.

Two of the three pillars of the 'step up' are stronger economic partnerships and stronger people-to-people relationships. The intersection of these two pillars touches on the two structural constraints outlined above and is where much of the future agenda for Australia's relationship with the South Pacific ought to lie. It's in

our long-term interest to encourage a larger expatriate population of Pacific islanders, and of Melanesians in particular, in Australia. It's also in our interest to make it easier for Pacific islanders to live in, work in, visit, and transit through Australia.

Much **progress** has been made in recent years in promoting labour mobility between the South Pacific and Australia; indeed, this represents one of the few genuinely structural shifts in our relations with the region for generations. (And, apart from anything else, these programs provide a useful precedent for special arrangements for the South Pacific.) But there's still much room for such schemes to expand in numbers, in sectoral scope and in flexibility.

Education is another area where we should build on, and refine, our approach. PNG and the Pacific islands do well from postgraduate scholarships through the Australia Awards scheme. Still, we should look carefully at investing better in future leaders by offering scholarships earlier in the educational scale, in particular for high-performing students at the secondary level.

It's not a new thought, but we must do better at getting Pacific island leaders to Australia, and to Canberra, on official visits. Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai noted politely, but pointedly, during his June 2018 visit to Canberra that his was the first guest-of-government visit by a Vanuatu prime minister since 1995. Ouch.

Equally, when the leaders of Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK and the US have all addressed Australia's parliament, how is it that we have not yet extended this privilege to Australia's nearest neighbour, Papua New Guinea? Such gestures don't cost much, but they can mean a lot.

So new ideas by all means. But steadiness, consistency and a good dose of respect will serve Australia best in the long term.

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