

Papua New Guinea: the power to choose

by Bart Philemon

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Bart Philemon, former PNG Treasurer, at the UPNG School of Business and Public Policy Graduation, 30 April 2025

Photo Credit: UPNG

*This is an edited extract from **a speech** given by Bart Philemon, former PNG Treasurer, at the University of PNG School of Business and Public Policy Graduation on 30 April 2025.*

As we celebrate the success of your graduation today, we must also prepare to confront and manage the future of Papua New Guinea under the difficult economic and social development conditions which we are currently confronted with.

Papua New Guinea today is facing unprecedented challenges of high inflation, huge unemployment, fuel shortages, kina devaluation and lack of sufficient level of foreign exchange. On top of the challenges of law-and-order management, shortages of medical supplies in hospitals, health centres, clinic and aid posts throughout the country, continuous power blackouts throughout Papua New Guinea over a decade and the ranking of Papua New Guinea as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

Ever since Papua New Guinea gained its independence 50 years ago, it has slowly descended into a slippery–slope situation while it is dreaming to become **the richest black Christian nation** in less than five years by 2030.

Papua New Guinea, by comparison with many developing countries in our region and around the world, is exceptionally richly endowed with both renewable and non-renewable resources. However, since independence we have not so far used the proceeds from these rich endowments to lay down strong building blocks for the sustainable future development for our children and grandchildren.

Our social and the economic indicators are really miserable and are sitting at the bottom in line with low income, poverty-ridden countries.

According to the United Nations, Papua New Guinea ranks among the lowest in the Human Development Index. Our child and maternal mortality rates remain very high. The very sad thing is that these high mortality rates occur mainly from

preventable diseases. Our life expectancy rate is low, around the mid-sixties. Our literacy rate is low, with many of our children lacking access to good quality education. Close to half of our population are living in poverty.

Basic government functions have deteriorated to such a state that they can no longer provide the basic services they are supposed to provide. Schools, aid posts, health centres, roads and bridges, airstrip maintenance, police and prison services and the national and provincial administrations have all broken down.

I see poorly educated children. I see seriously run-down public buildings. I see news headlines everyday about fraud and corruption within our society.

In urban centres, I see the social effect of poverty expressed in terms of squalid living in squatters' settlements in which crime and violence readily breed.

So how can a nation of people so richly blessed with such wealth and natural resources suffer, in the way that so many of our people do, as we are entering 50 years of our Independence?

Our biggest challenge we are facing today is corruption. It is a cancer eating away at the fabric of our society, and it demands our immediate attention.

Corruption in its many forms, from petty bribery to large-scale embezzlement, undermines our progress, erodes our trust and steals our future potential. It is the thief in the night, the saboteur of development, the silent oppressor of the poor.

The money meant for our schools, our hospitals, our infrastructure, is diverted into the pockets of a few, leaving our communities struggling to survive.

We see the effects of corruption every day. Roads crumble, hospitals, health centres, clinics and aid posts lack resources, and our children are denied quality education. The very foundation of our society is weakened, leaving us vulnerable to instability and despair.

But we are not powerless. We have the power to choose a different path of integrity and accountability. We must demand transparency from our leaders, hold them accountable for their actions, and refuse to tolerate corruption in any form.

You have a unique opportunity to lead by example. You must begin your career by fostering a culture of honesty and ethical behaviour. Report instances of corruption, not out of fear, but out of a commitment for a better future for Papua New Guinea.

Let us support organisations that fight corruption and let us educate our children about the importance of integrity.

The fight against corruption is our collective responsibility. It is our duty to stand up, to speak out and demand change. Let us make Papua New Guinea a beacon of hope, a place where integrity and accountability are not just words, but a normal way of life. Let us choose to be the agent of change for a better Papua New Guinea.

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