

Tess: My name's Tess Newton Cain, and for Pacific Conversations today, here in Port Vila, I'm very pleased to be able to chat with the Honourable Ralph Regenvanu, Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade. So, Minister, welcome to Pacific Conversations.

Ralph: Thank you, Tess.

Tess: So maybe, for those of us that haven't known you - I won't say how long I've known you for because that would tell everybody how old we are - but for those of you that haven't known you that long, maybe you could give us a bit of background about yourself and your journey so far, and where you currently find yourself.

Ralph: Okay. Well, I am basically a Port Vila citizen, origins in Malekula, but I've lived in town all my life except for the long period I was in Australia studying. So, I graduated from ANU with an honors degree in Development Studies and Anthropology, and then went pretty much straight into working at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

I became the Director of the Cultural Centre at the end of 1995, and I held that position for 11 years. And then I finished and went back to law school, as I'd done some law units in Australia, but I completed them at the USP Law School, beginning in 2007. Halfway through my degree, I stood for election and I got in, in 2008, at the end of 2008, as an independent candidate.

And myself and the others who were with me in the political journey set up the *Graon mo Jastis Pati* in 2010. In 2012, we won four seats, and I became Minister of Lands shortly thereafter, like six months after. And then I held that position with a break of six months, which was the period where the Joe Natuman government, which was us, was put out, and Sato [Kilman] came in with a government that was, shortly thereafter, put in jail. And then a snap election in January 2016, I came back as the Minister of Lands and held it for another two years until December last year, when I switched portfolios to this portfolio. So, this is my third term in Parliament.

Tess: That's great. So, your current portfolio, as we've said, is Foreign Affairs and External Trade. So, what do you think are the most important foreign policy issues for Vanuatu right now? And I guess associated with that, what would you like to see your ministry achieve whilst you're leading it?

Ralph: So, the biggest issues of this ministry are not so much external issues. The biggest issues of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is or are the internal coordination of the government so that we can strategically approach our international relations and diplomacy. So, at the moment, it is quite difficult to effectively strategise about how Vanuatu places itself in the world, especially the most important thing for us on the horizon is the LDC graduation in 2020.

We need to position ourselves so that we're ready for that when we no longer have concessional loans, we don't have access, special market access, all of those benefits we currently enjoy as an LDC. And internally, the way the government works, especially between the Department of Economic and Sector Planning in the Prime Minister's office, of which the Aid Coordination Unit is a part, and then you have

over in the Ministry of Finance, Department of Finance and Statistics, and then you have here in Foreign Affairs, External Trade International Cooperation.

The cooperation between those agencies in particular, not forgetting, of course, the Ministry of Agriculture now, with the EDF and the government's focus on Agri-tourism as the main driver of economic growth into the future. There is not enough communication/coordination. We haven't got the architecture internally that we feel is satisfactory so that we can really advocate for Vanuatu's interest internationally.

So, that's my priority is sorting that out. And I'm hoping that in my time here, by the time I finish, we will have a very good internal system, where we can know what our priorities are, we can plan ahead, we can know how strategically to align ourselves, what to ask for, the capacity to access all the money that is put on the table, which at the moment, we're not, how to use multilateral organisations, how to leverage our geopolitical position, our status as a membership of a number of different groupings at different levels, and of course, our bilateral relations, and also, of course, our membership of the United Nations, in a way which will really maximise the opportunities to Vanuatu, which is what this ministry should be doing. Basically, I believe at the moment, we're far from that. And that's not an issue of how we interact internationally, it's how we organise ourselves internally.

Tess: Right. Okay, great. Thank you. So, given what we know, and I think it picks up a couple of things that you've mentioned, but given what we know about Vanuatu politics, in terms of voter behavior, which tends to focus on the hyper-local, if you like, how do you as a political actor, translate the work of a ministry like this into stories and messages that resonate with the urban voters of Port Vila, where your constituency sits?

Ralph: Well, the best way to really make people appreciate our foreign relations is, of course, all the aid projects, right? And being able to show that they are well chosen, have high impact on the lives of people, and that they're conducted in a manner which is transparent, and they're done efficiently. So, that can be a problem when they're not done like that.

So, it is important for us to make sure we get the right kind of projects so that we can communicate with ordinary people about what's important. Because they're the most visible aspect of foreign affairs, is the actual tangible projects you see on the ground. And that brings me back to what I originally said about being very strategic in how we organise ourselves internally to get projects, attract the right kind of projects and the right kind of conditions that we want.

And that's all—yeah, that's the main thing that people see about foreign affairs. There is, of course, the very popular issue in Vanuatu of West Papua, and that's also something which governments need to take heed of, in terms of the very, very popular support for the independence of West Papua in Vanuatu, which is translated into one of our foreign affairs objectives.

And then, of course, I think there's a rising awareness about issues of climate change and how Vanuatu really is one of the victims of the whole climate change situation. That's an awareness that's gradually

growing, and it's something that we need to demonstrate that we're trying to deal with that in the best possible way for the benefit of ni-Vanuatu.

Tess: So, on that climate change issue, because quite recently, you've spoken quite forcefully around the issue of loss and damage, and how that needs to be factored in. Can you tell us a bit more about what your position is on that?

Ralph: Well, it's not just my position. I mean specifically about loss and damage, but more generally about climate finance. I mean this is a position of the Forum for a long time. And one of the main features of the meeting of Pacific island leaders with the President of France last week, in New Caledonia, was that everyone just said, "We've signed up to everything, we've ratified everything, but no money's on the table," which is what everyone promised, especially the rich polluting countries.

So, you've got to come to the game. You've got to play the game that you yourself agreed to. So, when it comes to the Green Climate Fund, for example, and the ways which you can access it, really, it's a very poor effort by the developed countries who've said that they would contribute. Let alone, talking about loss and damage, which has absolutely no contributions, even though that was also an agreement made by all the countries. Just talking about the Green Climate Fund, that is totally insufficient at present.

Tess: So, when you say insufficient, so is that, (a), it's undercapitalised, or (b), the processes for accessing it are inappropriate, or is it a combination of the two?

Ralph: It's both. But once we do access it, there isn't enough. There's not what was set as the target anyway, and I think that's—that is a key international issue that Vanuatu's concerned about now. And it's something that will continue to be an issue that we will need to keep pushing for. Because as we move out of LDC status, we don't have many options.

And that is one of the big ones that's there, because the world has agreed that there is a need to provide for the effects of climate change on us. So, it is a place where we—vulnerability, being a small state, being very vulnerable to natural disasters, experiencing natural disasters frequently as a result of climate change is one of the niches we have that we can attract finance for.

Tess: Mm-hmm, great. Now you made mention of the Pacific Islands Forum, and you and I have had previous conversations in which you've been quite skeptical about groupings such as the Forum, the Pacific Islands Development Forum, the Melanesian Spearhead Group. So, what's your current thinking about the role that those groupings play and Vanuatu's placing within them? What can Vanuatu contribute and what can we expect to receive as a result of being members of those groups?

Ralph: I think the Pacific Islands Forum is definitely useful, especially in terms of articulating common positions and being a conduit for development finance, accessing larger facilities and so on. So, I think the Forum is—has a role to play and is useful for Vanuatu. I can't say the same about the MSG. I think the MSG is... it's disappointing, to say the least and there's a question of its relevance.

Tess: In what way is it disappointing?

Ralph: Well, the way it's—the management has been handled is not at all according to what the MSG should be, which is an agreement of all the parties by consensus. That consensus approach to decision making is failing in the MSG. Vanuatu's been consistently saying that it's not happy with the way that decisions are made, that they're not made in this consensus manner. And that's continuing. Of course, it was set up for political—this is said regularly - it was set up for a political purpose, and essentially, it's no longer doing anything political. And I don't think it adds value much at all to anything.

Tess: Do you think it has a future?

Ralph: That depends on what happens in the next couple of years.

Tess: Right.

Ralph: If we see something happening, which shows that it's genuine about its purpose, and it's run in a way that the charter sets out, it could become relevant again.

Tess: Okay. Do you think that that—well, let me rephrase that question. I feel it's too simplistic to say it's all about the application of the ULMWP, but obviously, that is a key thing. What are the triggers, or what are the drivers that you think we need to see resolved in the next couple of years? Is it just about that, or is it that plus other things?

Ralph: It's more management issues.

Tess: Okay. So, you think it's a bureaucratic issue?

Ralph: Yeah, it's about how decisions are made in a way which reflects the interests of all the countries and how the organisation's actually run itself.

Tess: Right, okay. Do you feel that Vanuatu has a special, almost like a responsibility, special responsibility, because the MSG's secretariat is here, it's right next door? So, do you feel that Vanuatu has a special interest in the future of the MSG?

Ralph: Yeah, we do. We have a special interest. I feel though, that our voice hasn't been heard recently. So, it's—we are trying to get it back to a situation where we do feel like we get a lot out of it.

Tess: Okay. What about the PIDF? Where do you see Vanuatu's relationship with that organisation? Either where is it currently, or where do you think it might be in the future?

Ralph: We're currently not a member. And we're just—I suppose we're just watching it to see—we're really more invested in the Forum at this stage.

Tess: Okay, great. So, finally, last but certainly not least, you are a longstanding vocal supporter of increased political participation of women. So, can you tell us a bit about how you've put that into action and what more you plan to do in that space?

Ralph: Well, we've managed to get reserved seats at the municipal level through in 2013, I think it was. Yes. Which is a temporary special measure for four terms, or 16 years.

Tess: And you were quite instrumental in bringing that about and managing that process?

Ralph: Yes, myself and Prime Minister, Moana. He was a champion for it.

Tess: Yeah.

Ralph: And we tried to bring it in at the provincial level a couple of years ago, 2016. It didn't get through to the provincial level. And we also tried to get it through at the national level by constitutional amendment, in 2016, and that also didn't get support. It was actually very vocally opposed by the leader of the Opposition.

And we needed consensus to get it through. We wanted consensus. So, I think the next step is going for political party legislation, which is what we're working on now, to get a new bill through Parliament, which provides for the regulation of political parties. At the moment, we have nothing like that in Vanuatu.

So, just a very simple law that says you have to register a political party according to certain criteria, and there's certain financial reporting responsibilities and activity responsibilities, reporting activities—sorry, activity reporting responsibilities. And then in that legislation, I think, is room to create measures in which—by which women can get more representation. And so, that's the current way we're trying to look at it.

Tess: Okay. And will that be part of GJP's policy platform?

Ralph: It is.

Tess: Okay.

Ralph: All of that is.

Tess: Alright. What about further work in relation to reserved seats?

Ralph: Well, as I said, we got it through municipal. We tried in provincial level, it didn't get through. We tried at national level, it didn't get through. We could try again, but at the moment, we're trying a different tack.

Tess: Okay. But do you see that, like from your personal point of view, do you see that as being part of the mix in terms of getting more women into political decision making?

Ralph: Reserved seats, you mean?

Tess: Yeah.

Ralph: Definitely at the municipal level it's working. It's working because of the—in the recent Port Vila municipal elections, which was the second one in Port Vila run on the—with this temporary special measure in place, six women were elected in five wards. And of those six women, three got in on merit. They didn't need the reserved seats.

So, that really shows that people are now voting for women on merit and seeing them as candidates, which is the all-purpose. It would be good to have it at the provincial level, but members of Parliament themselves are the ones who are blocking that, because they still see provincial politics as about—it's, I suppose you could say it's—yeah, certain constituencies don't feel—they come from the constituencies, and so, they feel it's a threat to them. In the case of the—when we got the municipal reserved seats through, the main people pushing it was us urban MPs.

So, we were the ones, we weren't threatened and we pushed for it. Whereas for the rural MPs, I think they are threatened. And so, that's what happened with that resolution, or that decision. It got to the Council of Ministers and then was brought back to government caucus, and the government caucus would not support it. So, on the other hand, there is a process of decentralisation going on now, which if it's—if it is successful, the pilots that are going on now, the model that's being rolled out, if that does become successful, then in the end, we will get rid of provinces, so it won't become relevant anymore.

Tess: Right. So, that, correct me if I'm wrong, that's about devolving to the area council level?

Ralph: Local area councils.

Tess: And those—and there's—my understanding is that it's a requirement the area councils have representation from women's groups?

Ralph: Yes, each local area council has to have a representative of the chief, women, youth, and the private sector. So, we're trying to devolve power to local area councils, which are chosen not by the standard democratic election, but in the way communities choose their representatives.

Tess: Yes, so people identify these are the sensible people in our community that we want to make decisions.

Ralph: And then devolve also resources down to that level, so they decide about resource deployment in their local areas. The work that's going on in the Ministry of Internal Affairs to do that, they're just about to a point, a whole series of local area administrators, who are going to replace—who are going to be public servants, replacing local area secretaries who were appointed by provinces politically.

So, we're inserting public servants at that level as the administrators, who are the secretariat to the local area council. At the same time, Malvatumauri is doing its custom governance work through our Vanuatu pilots, which are all about identifying customary boundaries. And the idea is that eventually, they will become the same. Local area councils and customary boundaries.

Tess: Right, so they'll marry up over time, the area council, and then the *nasara* will come together.

Ralph: They will, we will, the government will make them one and the same. And eventually, for that track—this will take more than one legislature, but if, for example, GJP gets in as a mainstay of government, again, in the next legislature, it will continue. And eventually, provinces will become irrelevant. So, there won't be elections at that level anymore. And even we're hoping to devolve or break up constituencies to also follow those boundaries. But there's a lot of resistance to both of those from the more established political parties, of course, and that's the issue that's really making us go step by step.

Tess: Well on that note Minister I'd like to say thank you very much for joining us in Pacific Conversations and sharing your thinking.