



Peter O'Neill's statecraft: a skilful politician

By Jan Kees van Donge
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Peter O'Neill is a controversial politician; however, that may divert attention from the political skills that he displays.

Firstly, he counters effectively the centrifugal tendencies in Papua New Guinean politics. Party formation probably remains a highly informal affair, but he succeeded in having 79 out of 111 parliamentarians identify with his party. The opposition is minute and, immediately after the 2012 election, consisted of only four seats. This increased when four members of Don Polye's T.H.E party joined the opposition after being expelled from the government coalition. It was striking, however, that they were very reluctant to join the opposition and defined themselves initially as being on the middle bench when O'Neill dismissed Don Polye as minister of finance. The three ministers belonging to T.H.E. stayed on. Michael Somare's National Alliance also defined their position as on the middle bench when they formally left the coalition. Gary Juffa is the last example of this phenomenon: he moved to the middle benches but O'Neill relegated him to the opposition. Politicians are thus hesitant to be seen as opposing the O'Neill/Dion government.

Secondly, O'Neil has displayed great skill in reinforcing his dominance by forging double-crossing allegiances while forming new coalitions. He seemed to be in an almost existential struggle with Michael Somare in 2011-2012 during the O'Neill/Namah government. Each argued that the other should be in jail. However, Somare joined O'Neill in a coalition after O'Neill's election victory in 2012. In fact, the old forces in PNG politics seemed to re-establish themselves: Michael Somare, Julius Chan and Paias Wingti returned as governors of their provinces and supported the government. The forces representing change in the 2011-2012 O'Neill/Namah government did not fare well. O'Neill quickly dismissed William Duma as minister of mines and established dominance in the resources sector. Mekere Morauta was minister of public enterprises in the O'Neill/Namah government during 2011-2012. In that position, he dismissed Arthur Somare, the son of Michael Somare, and Arthur Somare lost influence in the PNG/LNG project as a result. William Duma was succeeded by Francis Potape, whom Duma had succeeded in 2011. Potape was a lame duck

because of corruption scandals hanging over him. However, Arthur Somare, after losing his parliamentary seat, came back as an influential consultant in the PNG/LNG project. He moved into a position of great influence, outside regular political scrutiny.

Morauta was a second victim. He was a major force in the creation of the O'Neill/Namah government, and as minister of public enterprises was pursuing major governance scandals. Morauta left politics in 2012, but he remained influential. That influence was undermined when O'Neill made a major move against his remaining influence by nationalising the Ok Tedi mine and attempting to grab the Sustainable Development Program, financed from income from that mine.

Also, O'Neill could never have come to power without the revolt within the National Alliance party when Michael Somare was ill in Singapore. Don Polye was a major architect of that revolt. Polye was sidelined as minister of finance when O'Neill clinched the major loan from UBS to buy the shares in Oil Search. Polye is now in opposition.

Thirdly, O'Neill's skill as a politician is displayed by his ability to remain in power despite engaging in these conflicts. He also remains a popular politician despite controversial issues surrounding predatory behaviour. He manages to deflect criticism of his person and performance by diverting the debate to development. He is a master at creating a discourse in which he considers governance issues as secondary to his great scheme to break the stagnation or lack of implementation in PNG's administration. Besides that, he identifies with worthy causes that are above political controversy: fighting domestic violence or campaigning against the spread of tuberculosis.

Several explanations suggest themselves for this apparent stability within the context of great conflicts on governance issues.

Firstly, the scope for a vote of no confidence is very small as such a move is banned in 30 months of the 60 in the parliamentary term. The small window for such a move exists now in the middle of the five year term of parliament. However, there are more obstacles. Parliament's sitting terms have been decreased from a minimum of 63 sitting days to 40 sitting days. The intention to mount a vote of confidence has to be proposed a month beforehand and such a move needs a minimum support of 22 parliamentarians.

There are other reasons why such a move is unlikely. Moving into opposition makes it harder to get funds to be used at the discretion of an MP: the District Service Improvement Funds.

Additionally, the moves against corrupt MPs have become much more severe than before.

Most notable is the ten year prison sentence imposed on Paul Tiensten. O'Neill has in fact taken control of the anti-corruption bodies, and that could be an important incentive to conform in PNG's political culture.

Lastly and probably most importantly: O'Neill is popular and there is nothing to be gained by going against him.

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