

Reflections on Australia and PNG: Sir Julius Chan's remarks at the launch of 'Playing the Game'



The Development Policy Centre hosted the launch of the memoirs of Sir Julius Chan, March 2016

by Julius Chan

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Last week, the Development Policy Centre hosted the launch of the memoirs of Sir Julius Chan, who served as PNG Prime Minister twice, and is currently Governor of New Ireland Province. The following are Sir Julius' remarks from the launch.

It's been some years since I last visited this great man-made city [Canberra], the foundation stone of democracy in Australia. 38 days short of 25 years ago, on 24 April, 1981, it was my privilege to open the Papua New Guinea High Commission office in Canberra.

I said then that in a traditional Papua New Guinea society the beat of the Kundu drum has been the means of summoning leaders to the *kivung*, or meeting ground. I remember clearly Andrew Peacock and I played the drums calling many leaders from other countries to the opening, jointly participated in by then-Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and myself.

It is momentous to be back this evening, in this school named after my personal economic mentor and friend Sir John Crawford — a close friend of Papua New Guinea. I therefore feel somewhat spurred by the spirit of that great Australian — giving me confidence to outpour years of exciting experiences, taking Papua New Guinea from a colony to self-government and independence.

In many ways, many of you have been part of the making of the independent state of Papua New Guinea and I am enlightened by your presence.

In collaboration with my writer and editor, Lucy Palmer, I have written an account of my life and the development of my country over the last 70 years. It is a deeply personal account and I have been more candid in this memoir than at any other time in my public life.

Papua New Guinea is a culture where oral history still dominates. There are still relatively few books written by our people. To have a former Prime Minister produce a memoir of this kind is unique. Indeed, I believe mine may be the first political memoir that looks back and tries to give an account of our country's modern history, at least from my perspective!

In doing so, I have created something I never thought possible — a permanent record for generations of Papua New Guineans to come.

Just as Australians can read the documents surrounding Federation in 1902, our people now have an account of their history written by someone who was there and who actually experienced it.

The late American Senator Robert Kennedy once said:

“Like it or not we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more open to the creative energy of men than any other time in history.”

The period surrounding Papua New Guinea's journey to independence from Australia in 1975 was such a time. As I said earlier, many of you here will remember it well.

We witnessed the birth of a new nation and experienced what still remains as one of the smoothest transitions to democracy in modern times.

It has been more than 40 years since the flag of our Australian colonisers was lowered for the last time, and I have been privileged to serve as Prime Minister for two terms in that period. Grand Chief Somare has served four times and Pias Wingti twice. This is rare in any country, including yours.

As a sovereign nation I think we have achieved a great deal since then, and there is much for us to be proud of. However, everyone here tonight knows that Papua New Guinea faces unique and urgent challenges.

There is still so much to be done.

Tonight I would like to briefly share some reflections from my memoirs, in particular those that focus on the relationship between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

I was born on the island of Tanga, off the east coast of New Ireland, just before the Second World War. My mother, Miriam Tinkoris, was a Papua New Guinean, and my father, Chin Pak, a Chinese migrant from Guangdong Province. I was the fifth born of their six children.

Our family life was completely transformed by the advent of the war. The Japanese were suspicious of my family and forced us all into a labour camp, and tortured my uncle. I was much too young to remember of course, but I do recall our eventual arrival in Rabaul on a barge under the command of an Australian soldier called Robinson. He was the very first Australian I ever met.

I grew up in a large and striving extended family in Rabaul. We lived with my father's brother, a shipping captain named Chin Him. He and my father ran a modest shipping cargo carrier, transporting goods around the islands of East New Britain and New Ireland.

My first significant experience of the Australian way of life came when I was 14. Along with my cousin Joe Chan, I was sent to board at Marist Brothers, Ashgrove, in Brisbane.

We came to a strange land, not knowing anybody. Our Australian schoolmates knew we did not belong so they looked after us and treated us like kings. I could not have found a better place to grow up — they were probably the best years of my life. It was here that I discovered the importance of mateship and made many lifelong friends, even though I found school work difficult.

Luckily I was very good at sport, particularly rugby where I represented the First XV for three consecutive years. Ashgrove produced a lot of footballers, like Des Connor and later John Eales and many other champions. After a year at the St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland, I had an accident riding a motorbike on a rainy day. My wheels locked in the tramline in Brisbane and I was hospitalised for several months. I was forced to abandon my studies and return to Rabaul. That was 57 years ago, and it seems more than mere coincidence that Cathy Vallance of the University of Queensland Press is present tonight.

The only way to get business experience at the time was through the co-operative movement, so I applied for a position in the public service based in Port Moresby. I think when they saw the name Chan they assumed I was pure Chinese and let me in. As soon as I arrived in Port Moresby I began to feel the impact of discrimination. I was kicked out of the 4-mile Donga after one night and shifted to Ranaguri Hostel. Another evening, I was taken to the Kone Club by an Englishman, Bill Onslow, and we were asked to leave. Even though he did not tell me, I knew the reason. I made an appeal to my boss, John Keith McCarthy, the Director of Native Affairs. After the club refused to have me as a member, McCarthy and several others resigned their membership in protest. This incident in the late 1960s showed that times were changing — many Australians supported Papua New Guineans having a more equal place in their own country.

Despite this incident, my brief life as a public servant was happy. I was taught the basic accounting systems of the cooperative movement. All the Australians I worked with became great friends; we went on patrols all over the country from the Highlands to the Sepik River.

After a while, I returned once again to Rabaul to help my father in the family shipping business. One of the people I came to know was a former Australian World War II Coastwatcher and plantation owner called Ray Lacey from Anir Island. It was Ray's idea, supported by local Chiefs, that I should stand for the House of Assembly as an elected member. I was successful. My first election victory was in 1968 for the seat of Namatanai.

It was during this period that questions about the political future of Papua New Guinea became more pressing, both from inside and outside the country. [Australian Prime Minister Gough] Whitlam's decision for self-government in December 1973 to be followed by full independence was not widely popular. Many people thought we were not ready. This is still being debated today.

When I became the Minister for Internal Finance, I was told by the Administrator Les Johnson that we needed to move on building a stronger economic base, then take the hard road to establish a central bank, a banking system and a new currency. "You have a long way to catch up. We have got to move," Johnson told me. I was expected to create all of this within a very short time frame, to catch up with the popular push for freedom. Ready or not, change was coming.

I was fortunate enough to have good people around me in Ross Garnaut and Henry ToRobert. Frank Crean and Andrew Peacock also gave me a great deal of advice and support. Fraser and Peacock crossed swords with Treasurer Phillip Lynch to secure the first independent budget for PNG.

We went into independence with confidence as we knew Australia would not abandon us. It's important to understand that many of us did not really know what independence would mean for Papua New Guinea. We were just prepared to work hard and to do our best. Writing this memoir has been an opportunity to think about the long standing relationship between our two countries, which are bound together by geography and history.

Many of my closest friends have been Australians. I think of the late Sir Ken Tresize and of Warren Dutton, who dedicated their lives to the service of people in Papua New Guinea. I cannot imagine a more trusted or treasured friend. My understanding of Australians, their values and the way they think, began on the sporting fields of Queensland during my formative years. I was privileged to have such an opportunity

to see firsthand what “mateship” was all about. There are still today many Papua New Guineans who have the chance to study and work here, to open their minds to the way Australians think and behave. There is a significant Australian aid program and an ongoing commitment to improving the lives of our people. But there needs to be more opportunities in order to capitalise on our long relationship, for the benefit of all. After reflecting for some time, I have come to the conclusion that our friendship has suffered in recent years. One issue is the difficulty that Papua New Guineans face when trying to come to Australia — even for a brief visit. We are not afforded any of the privileges that many post-colonial nations enjoy with their former “masters.”

There has also been a significant shift in the years since independence in the number and calibre of Australians who really know and understand Papua New Guinea. There is still a great deal of misunderstanding in the Australian media about who we are. Sadly, it is mostly negative news. The Australians who understand us best, know that our nation and its cultures are complex — they recognise that forty years is a very short period of time to create a modern state.

As I move into another year as Governor of New Ireland, I can see all the problems that need addressing in my own electorate. There are issues of land ownership and the exploitation of our natural resources. There is an urgent need for health, education and training. We have an ambitious program of total elimination of malaria in New Ireland. Some very committed organisations, like Australian Doctors International and Malaria Alliance, are with us tonight.

There is also the upcoming referendum on Bougainville, which will have a significant impact on the future and unity of our nation. If Bougainville does become independent then I think other island provinces will surely want to follow, including New Ireland, and I would support that. Only responsible, good and fair governments will hold us together.

These are issues of enormous significance not only to Papua New Guinea, but also to Australia and our region.

There are some people who say Australians do not understand Papua New Guinea or are indifferent to us, their closest neighbors. Ethnic differences exist the world over. Even as I speak, millions of asylum seekers are swamping different European countries, and even democratic campaigns in old democracies are disturbed by protesters. Problems like these are common worldwide. They are created by men and must be solved by men.

I have confidence that when leaders follow laws and rules that they themselves

make, then “playing the game” might help to bridge the gap.

*The Hon Sir Julius Chan MP, GCL GCMG KBE CBE, is Governor of New Ireland Province and former PNG Prime Minister. His memoir, **Playing the Game**, is published by University of Queensland Press.*

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