

Minister Penny Wong and the Australian team in Vanuatu in December 2022



Will bipartisanship help build a generational partnership with the Pacific?

By Tom Barber
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Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong and Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy recently travelled to Vanuatu, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia. Joining them were Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Birmingham and Shadow Minister for International Development and the Pacific Michael McCormack, making it the first bipartisan visit to the region since 2019 according to the [joint media release](#).

[Wong described the delegation](#) as “a statement about the enduring nature of our partnership with Pacific Island nations”, and [Birmingham said](#) the trip demonstrated “that Australia’s engagement with our Pacific neighbours is of the highest priority and transcends domestic politics”. Such statements are tacit acknowledgements that contributing to a strong, resilient and prosperous Pacific not only benefits regional countries, but also pays clear [dividends for Australia](#).

Bipartisan visits to the region aren’t new - Professor [Graeme Smith notes](#) that “the tradition goes back a long way” - but they “[fell into abeyance](#)” during Marise Payne’s tenure as foreign minister. This irregularity is symptomatic of an uncomfortable truth in the “Pacific family” era - that, outside periods of perceived threat or crisis, Australia’s regional engagement can be “[characterised by unclear, inconsistent and competing interests and intentions](#)”.

If the vision underpinning the high-level rhetoric is to be realised, it is critical that the current attention being paid to the region becomes a new baseline and not just another high-water mark. To that end, Australia’s level of attention must remain clear, consistent and coherent, buttressed by a long-term - and thus bipartisan - commitment.

Australian foreign policy has tended to be less politically contested than other policy areas. [Allan Gyngell](#), author of the seminal history of Australian foreign policy, acknowledges that

it “has always had a strong bipartisan core”. That isn’t necessarily a good thing, and [Alexander Trauth-Goik makes a good point](#) that we should be careful not to equate bipartisanship with sound foreign policy. But, as [Richard Maude reminds us](#), “bipartisanship is not automatically incompatible with contestability”, it being possible to improve design and operation through “good-faith dialogue” outside the [partisan peaks](#) of the three-year election cycle.

Bipartisanship is neither a good nor a bad thing in and of itself. What matters is context, and with respect to the Pacific – in particular the need for a sustained Australian commitment – this makes bipartisanship a net positive.

When Conroy commits to “ensuring Pacific priorities are at the forefront of our engagement”, and McCormack pledges “that regardless of who is in government in Australia, our collective priority is working collaboratively with our neighbours to secure the best outcome for our region”, this is a signal of enduring commitment.

Taking the Minister and Shadow Minister at their word, and assuming their statements are reflective of a revival of genuine bipartisan agreement on the need for Australia to be a long-term partner with the Pacific, what exactly does that look like?

The Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue ([AP4D](#)) [held consultations](#) with more than 100 development, diplomacy and defence experts to identify ways in which Australia could partner with the Pacific to shape a shared future. A key idea that emerged was that Australia needed to frame its engagement as a generational partnership by demonstrating responsiveness to the Pacific’s priorities over the long term, underpinned by relationships of mutuality, respect and shared leadership.

In practical terms, some of the recommendations for getting there include acknowledging the existential threat of climate change, opening space for more First Nations engagement, partnering on digital resilience and transformation, expanding labour mobility, addressing education gaps, ensuring sustainable infrastructure investment, and responding to local security agendas.

Encouragingly, each of these priorities was reflected in the [itinerary for the recent bipartisan trip](#). The delegation spoke with leaders about the climate threat, discussed the government’s First Nations foreign policy with local traditional leaders, launched an initiative for digitising clinical patient data, [met with entrepreneurs](#) who had participated in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, [visited a school](#) supported by Australia’s development program, [toured an Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific](#) solar project, [attended the handing over ceremony](#) of a wharf built as part of Australia’s

Pacific Maritime Security Program, and [signed a security treaty](#) with Vanuatu.

The focus on economic development and local security needs displayed a continuity with [previous trips in 2016](#) and [2018](#). But the framing of climate change as “an existential threat” marked a substantive change, contrasting with the 2016 statement’s vague reference to “the climate change action Australia is taking”. The adoption of language in clear alignment with the [Boe Declaration](#) and in acknowledgement of Pacific perspectives sends a strong signal that Australia is listening to regional priorities.

While the fact of [geostrategic competition is undoubtedly an impetus](#) for renewed Australian interest in the region, a generational commitment requires broad-based foundations. Bipartisan visits are by no means a silver bullet, and much of what takes place may seem trivial in isolation. But they are an important signal of commitment, and can lay the groundwork for deeper engagement across the board. Should the bipartisanship of this trip prove enduring, it will be an essential step on the path towards Australia becoming a generational partner with the Pacific.

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