



Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

WATCHING BRIEF 21-11: AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

October 2021

This Brief deals with the issues facing the people of the Pacific, and the links between them and Australia's policies.

Pacific Concerns and Voices

The Pacific Islands Forum is the principal inter-governmental political and economic organisation in the Pacific. Founded in 1971, it has 18 members – Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Following a dispute about the filling of offices within the Forum, five nations from Micronesia (Palau, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru and Kiribati) announced in February 2021 that they would leave the Forum, and this has cast some doubt over the Forum's future. Negotiations are continuing to resolve this impasse.

www.forumsec.org

The Boe Declaration on Regional Security (adopted by the Forum in 2018) defined security as including human security, humanitarian assistance, environmental security, and cooperation on disasters and climate change. It resolved:

1. We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement;

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2. We recognise an increasingly complex regional security environment driven by multifaceted security challenges , and a dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region;
3. We affirm our stewardship of the Blue Pacific and aspire to strengthen and enhance our capacity to pursue our collective security interests given our responsibility to sustain our Pacific peoples and our resources;

The Forum celebrated 50 years in August 2021 with a series of meetings, and highlighted the achievements it has made, including supporting self-determination, asserting Pacific interests in the formation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the establishment of a Pacific nuclear free zone, taking a strong role in oceans protection, global advocacy on climate change, and promoting trade and development in the region.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Forum leaders called on global leaders to support “the equitable and affordable distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 treatments and vaccines to all Pacific people to mitigate health concerns, improve their wellbeing, and facilitate early economic recovery”. Australia’s willingness to help in vaccine certification and in doubling the number of Pacific workers in Australia by March 2022 was welcomed.

Looking ahead to the UN Conference of Parties 26 to be held in Glasgow UK in November, the leaders reaffirmed climate change as the “greatest threat facing the Blue Pacific”. They urged all major emitters to commit to stronger climate action and strategies to achieve net zero carbon by 2050.

The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Associations (PIANGO) is the regional network in 25 Pacific Island countries, established in 1991 to assist NGOs give voice to their concerns and collaborate for sustainable human development. Its activities cover information sharing, capacity building, strengthening key relationships, and ensuring quality performance. It seeks to strengthen recognition of the vital role of civil society in the Pacific. www.piango.org

The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) has reflected the ongoing commitment of Christian groups in the Pacific. Formed in 1966, it has 27 member churches and ecumenical groups. It has focused on education, economic development, communication, family life, and church and society. It has promoted the role and status of women, taken a lead in political problems, and opposed nuclear testing. Recently it launched a campaign on climate action, using a range of large banners displayed in churches across the region. See www.oikoumene.org

The University of the South Pacific (USP) has an important role through its vision of “Shaping Pacific Futures”. It has campuses in many Pacific countries, offering a wide range of courses on six areas - accounting/finance; business/management; IT/engineering/physics; law/social service; arts/education; agriculture/ocean/environment. www.usp.ac.fj

There is a new concern arising in the Pacific about the formation of the AUKUS agreement by Australia, UK and USA. Maria Timon from Kiribati, who represents Pacific issues at the

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Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney, spoke recently on a webinar organised by the peace movement. She said that AUKUS reminds Pacific people that they are seen as expendable and 'collateral damage'. Australia seems to have joined this agreement without a thought for the consequences for Pacific Island countries. She sees AUKUS as compromising the nuclear free zone, and substituting weapons for the real needs of the people – such as clean water. See www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=290126009367021

Australia's Role in the Pacific Region

The history of Australia's connections with the Pacific is mixed. As [Ian Hoskins](#) has written in a recent book *Australia and the Pacific*, the ill treatment of Pacific Islanders brought here to work in Queensland before federation, the 'white Australia' policy after federation, and the deportation of islanders in large numbers in 1907, did nothing to endear Pacific peoples to Australia. The way Australia has subsequently dealt with Nauru for phosphate and as a refugee detention centre has reinforced the perception of exploitation.

On the other hand, Ian Hoskins says that missionaries and others took a more humanitarian approach and criticized the 'white nation' emphasis. Also, the Mabo decision (arising from an Islander's claim to land) was a significant factor in influencing native title policies in Australia.

Reporting about the Pacific tends to be shallow and reactionary, according to [Natalie Whiting](#) (ABC correspondent in PNG and winner of the latest Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism). She will be using the \$10,000 grant for an in-depth look at the causes of violence in the PNG Highlands, especially focusing on local perspectives. The website of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) reports that there is a Pacific Media Assistance Scheme to facilitate regional media developments covering business, government, and society via Pacific media. Australia's contribution over the period 2017-21 has been \$10.3m, and further support has been given to install new transmitters and technical support for radio – a big help during the pandemic.

There are now many academic and research links with the Pacific. A particular link that has been going for many years is that of the [Australian National University \(ANU\)](#) through its Research School of Pacific Studies. It now has another specialised group called the [Pacific Institute](#) which enables more detailed research on the Pacific, thereby building greater awareness within Australia of the importance of the region. See www.bellschool.anu.edu.au/research/overview

Australian Aid

In the current financial year 2021-22 Australian aid totals \$1.44b and is being directed to individual countries and through the organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the South Pacific Community, the Council of Regional Organisations, and the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway. The three 'pillars' of focus are – health security, stability, and economic recovery. The government has created a new [Office of the Pacific](#) within DFAT "to support Australia's deepening engagement with the Pacific, to enhance whole-of-government coordination, and to drive implementation of our regional activities consistent with priorities of Pacific countries". See www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/office-of-the-pacific.

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Initiatives that Australia is taking include the following:

- Pacific Secondary School Scholarships Program to enable students from the Pacific too study in Australia.
- BRIDGE School Partnerships Program to support exchange between teachers on best practice and inter-cultural learning.
- Science Circus Pacific to encourage science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) education in the Pacific.
- Vaccine supply through \$80m to COVAX plus \$300m for economic and social costs of the pandemic.
- Maintaining a humanitarian corridor to ensure effective transport in the Pacific region.
- Continuing recruitment of Pacific workers through the seasonal workers scheme.
- A partnership with New Zealand to strengthen biosecurity and agricultural trade in the Pacific region.
- Financing infrastructure in the Pacific, including a high-quality communication cable between the Solomons and Papua New Guinea.
- Support for renewable energy, climate change and disaster relief.
- Defence, police and security links through joint training.

The peak body for Australian aid NGOs is the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). It covers a wide range of groups working in the Pacific, and uses its advocacy to encourage greater official aid. See www.acfid.asn.au The Church Agencies Network (CAN) is a vehicle for Christian aid in the Pacific region. It has been especially effective in coordinating responses to disasters, and works with the Pacific Conference of Churches, ACFID and DFAT wherever possible. See www.churchagenciesnetwork.org.au Quaker Service Australia is a member of both ACFID and CAN.

Analysis and Commentary

Harley Dennett, in *The Canberra Times* of 28 April 2021, quotes Professor Michael Wesley (University of Melbourne) as saying that cold war attitudes and empty climate promises from Australia have pushed South Pacific leaders towards China. He says Australia should focus on training people rather than countering China with infrastructure and security spending. Australia should focus on promoting tourism, reviewing visa restrictions on Pacific people, supporting a military-free region, and investing more in education and skills development.

Dr Tess Newton Cain and Dr Wesley Morgan (Griffith University) wrote a paper about 'Strengthening Australia's Relationships with Countries of the Pacific Region' (*Asia Institute*, June 2020). They stress the diversity of the region and say that "it is intellectually weak and strategically unhelpful to see the multiplicity of linkages that Australia has with the countries of the Pacific region through one-dimensional paradigms such as 'security' or 'aid'." In their view, the 'Pacific Step-Up' policy of Australia is driven mainly by an attempt to maintain political influence and ignores the very special form of regional cooperation and collective diplomacy forged by Pacific nations. "Australia should acknowledge, support and celebrate Pacific Island leadership on the world stage" and work with them to strengthen multilateral rules and institutions.

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The authors say that there are many positive connections, including the large Pacific diaspora settled in Australia. Australia can build on these by (a) improving market access for Pacific products (food, handicrafts), (b) ensuring that labour mobility schemes are more inclusive of women and people from poor communities, and (c) offer permanent migration for islanders affected by climate change.

Nic Maclellan (Pacific Affairs Correspondent for *Inside Story*) wrote on 14 October 2021 that, over many years, the Pacific people have united to resist threats caused by the disposal of nuclear waste, nuclear testing, and the impacts of climate change. The recent AUKUS agreement is seen as another threat which will bring forth strong objections. The Australian government underestimates the longstanding negative impact of nuclear testing, and the commitment of the Island nations to a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific. Japan's plans to dump nuclear waste from Fukushima into the Pacific Ocean have upset the Islanders. The AUKUS initiative adds to the sense that Australia, UK and USA are interfering with the peaceful ambitions of the Pacific people, pressuring them to take sides in the conflict with China.

Leanne Smith (Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney) wrote (*The Conversation*, 11 February 2020) that research shows that the people of Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji say that Australia does not know how to engage as part of the Pacific community because (a) the quality of the relationships is more important than the quantity of aid or trade, (b) values are a vital part of how we conduct ourselves, and (c) whilst our historical relationship is valued we are one of many Pacific partners. She says that the research further shows areas of concern – visa restrictions on Pacific visitors, too many international NGOs involved in aid at the expense of local NGOs, and Aboriginal people not visible in relations with the Pacific.

The recent decision by the Australian government to provide most of the funds (\$1.9b) for Telstra to acquire the Pacific telco Digicel has passed with little analysis. Zoe Samios (Sydney Morning Herald, 26 October 21) said the move is to prevent Digicel from being taken over by a Chinese company and to boost Australia's footprint in the region. Paul Budde, a telecoms analyst, said (Reuters, 25 October 21) that "if the government had not asked and underwritten it, Telstra would not have done it". There has been no indication of the extent of consultation with Pacific leaders before the decision was made, and it is assumed that they welcome the plan.

Simon Mark (*Springer*, 11 Jan 2021) has reported that New Zealand has a Pacific Reset launched in 2018 that emphasizes "engagement, partnerships, and collaboration, and a greater focus on soft power, public diplomacy and people-to-people measures". He notes that the Pacific is the region in which New Zealand matters the most and has the most influence. The initiatives in the region by Australia, UK, Indonesia and India (as well as China) are part of an increasingly contested and crowded strategic environment. New Zealand seeks to apply its approach to public diplomacy so as to build better relationships with Pacific countries.

In New Zealand the new Minister of Foreign Affairs (the Hon Nanaia Mahuta) has recently announced a new way of working with its Pacific neighbours - moving from reset to resilience. She describes this as enhancing New Zealand's connection and relationship to the Pacific (whanaungatanga), speaking to the benefit of reciprocity and resilience

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(manaakitanga); and reflecting an aspiration for greater collaboration and multilateralism (kotahitanga), and New Zealand's stewardship responsibilities for Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, our Blue Ocean Continent (kaitiakitanga).

The response acknowledges that COVID-19 has amplified vulnerability and inequality, and has set back development progress in the Pacific region. It draws upon a common commitment to the SDGs, to support each Pacific nation's ambition to chart their own recovery and development pathway. It also commits to continue supporting Pacific Island countries to respond to the impacts of the climate crisis, and on issues that matter most for our region, in a way that makes a positive difference for the long term.

The New Zealand Prime Minister has also recently announced a commitment of \$1.3 billion in grant-based climate finance, between 2022 and 2025 which is new money and will have a strong focus on the Pacific.

Issues

From the foregoing paragraphs, the following issues emerge as of particular relevance today:

1. The increased engagement of Australia with the region, its role in the Pacific Islands Forum, and its substantial financial commitments on security, health, and economic development.
2. The urgency of climate change as a priority concern for the Pacific, and the perceived poor response from Australia to calls for greater action to support Pacific needs (including for more generous labour mobility schemes and visas for permanent migration).
3. The impact of COVID-19 and the enhanced efforts by Australia to respond to the need for vaccines, transport, and communication.
4. The variable degree of awareness among Australians about the Pacific, partly owing to limited media links, compared with the ongoing well-established presence of New Zealand.
5. The extent of real engagement with the Pacific Islands in terms of supporting Pacific leadership globally, partnerships, education, skills, and the emerging civil society voices.
6. The likely negative impact on the region of initiatives such as AUKUS, and greater military spending by Australia, with little consultation with Pacific communities who value their nuclear-free zone and their peaceful relations with other countries.

Friends are encouraged to undertake their own investigations of available information about the Pacific, using resources such as those in this Brief. QPLC welcomes feedback on matters that might be taken up in the future.

Canberra
October 2021