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The Hidden Order in Melanesian 'Disorderly Democracy'

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**Paper prepared for:
How Representative is Representative Democracy?
Australasian Study of Parliament Group
New South Wales Chapter
2014 Annual Conference**

**SYDNEY
1 – 3 October 2014**

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Abstract

Western Melanesian parliamentary politics is often seen as exceptional, odd and unfamiliar, particularly when contrasted with the experience in Australia, New Zealand and some of the Polynesian states. High turnover of incumbent MPs (ranging between 50 and 80% at each election since independence), large numbers of candidates contesting elections (in PNG), 'fluid' party allegiances and regular 'no confidence' challenges on the floor of parliament (in PNG, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands) are regularly seen as symptomatic of a uniquely 'unbounded' or 'disorderly' style of democracy, one lacking many of the key features normally associated with representative democracy. Yet many other parts of the world have experienced phases of rapid changes of government (e.g. the French Fourth Republic), or high levels of incumbent turnover (e.g. 19th century New South Wales). Weakly institutionalized party systems are present across the globe (as Scott Mainwaring shows for Brazil and Russia) and proliferation of candidates contesting elections in India or Congo (Kinshasa) may be common signs of what Kanchan Chandra calls 'patronage democracy'. This paper argues that models based upon disorder, instability or lack of constraint in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu account poorly for what truly distinguishes Western Melanesian democracies, or what has kept them (excepting Fiji) from embracing authoritarian or semi-authoritarian types of government since independence. Instead, the paper offers an alternative explanation based on the barriers to centralizing power in highly heterogeneous and dispersed polities.

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Introduction

In March 2011, a Vanuatu-based think-tank, the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (PIPP), released a paper warning of the dangers of creeping authoritarianism across the Pacific, as rulers responded to a 'youthquake' across the Pacific Islands. At that time, Frank Bainimarama's coup in Fiji was challenging the prevailing Pacific regional order and the resulting government was cultivating closer relations with China. The PIPP saw efforts to ban 'no confidence' votes, restrain oversight agencies and limit parliamentary sittings in PNG and Solomon Islands as signalling a broader drift towards 'a more authoritarian "guided" democracy', warning that Australia was 'rapidly losing influence' because of a failure to appreciate 'that parliamentary democracy is failing Melanesia in its current form'¹.

These fears as regards PNG proved badly wrong. Only three months after the PIPP report, the PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, who had travelled to Singapore for heart surgery, was out of office after the Speaker declared the Prime Minister's post vacant, and installed instead Peter O'Neill. Somare, the 'grand chief', three-time Prime Minister and dominant personality of PNG politics since independence, returned to PNG later in the year in a vain effort to recapture his former position, and was backed in this attempt by high court judges and even some military officers in an abortive putsch. This constitutional crisis was PNG's worst since independence, but the dispute was ultimately settled by the 2012 general election. In those elections, O'Neill's Peoples Congress emerged as the largest party, while Somare's National Alliance slumped at the polls. In an extraordinary reconciliation after such a bitter and protracted struggle, Somare joined the resulting government. The prediction of authoritarian rule steadily spreading from Fiji westwards had proved badly mistaken. Nor was this the sole such case.

A few years earlier, one scholar had talked of a 'creeping coup' in the Solomon Islands, 'as an increasingly strong leader slowly altered the political system'². 2006-7 Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare had installed political supporters into

¹ Pacific Institute of Public Policy, Youthquake: Will Melanesian Democracy be Sunk by Demography, <http://www.pacificpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/D17-PiPP.pdf>.

² Clive Moore 2008 "Uncharted Pacific waters: the Solomon Islands constitution and the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, 2006-2007", *History Compass*, 6, 2, pp. 488-509.

key positions across government, most famously including Fiji Indian lawyer Julian Moti (who was thereafter relentlessly pursued by the Australian Federal Police, even including the smashing down of a door in the Prime Minister's Office that cost police commissioner Shane Castles his job). Yet in December 2007, Sogavare was out, ousted through a 'no confidence' challenge. Mr Moti was soon on a plane to Brisbane, deported to face the Australian courts. Another bid to centralise power, and usurp the functions of oversight agencies had ultimately failed. In Vanuatu likewise – Prime Ministers who sought to consolidate their rule through legal devices to avert parliamentary challenges (e.g. Serge Vohor in 2004) ultimately failed.

If the predictions of an imminent slide into authoritarian rule have fared poorly, so too have expectations of unrestrained disorder, chaos or catastrophe. Old hands specialising in PNG politics will be familiar with this kind of doomsdayism³. 'Papua New Guinea on the Brink' was the title of one such piece by the Centre for Independent Studies, which warned in 2003 that 'Papua New Guinea shows every sign of following its Melanesian neighbour, the Solomon Islands, down the path to economic paralysis, government collapse and social despair'⁴. This was written just as PNG was commencing its first government since independence to survive a full parliamentary term, and just as a mineral resource boom was commencing that looks set to double PNG's GDP. Unlike most of the Pacific Islands, PNG has chronic levels not only of 'basic needs' but also food poverty⁵, but the economy is anything but 'paralysed'. Corruption has severely damaged the body politic, as in Solomon Islands⁶, but in neither country has the government 'collapsed'.

The 2000 coups in Fiji and Solomon Islands led some to talk of an 'Africanization of the South Pacific', and/or to predict that Vanuatu would be the next to collapse along the 'arc of instability' that allegedly ran from Aceh in Western Indonesia through West Papua and Bougainville down to Tonga in the east⁷. The Vanuatu paramilitary police had occasionally mutinied in the 1990s, as had the PNG Defence Force, though often over relatively trivial matters such as wages and conditions rather than in a concerted bid to capture state power. Neither country witnessed a full-blown coup. Solomon Islands reverted to parliamentary democracy, of a type, within a month of the June 5th 2000 coup. Even in Fiji, where a longer-term military-backed regime took power after the December 2006 coup, the 'roadmap' that was put in place after the 2009 abrogation of the Constitution always envisaged a reversion to parliamentary democracy (or, as the coup-makers and their supporters preferred to phrase this, a 'first ever' democratic election).

Further eastwards into Polynesia, or northwards into Micronesia, stability has always been greater than in the lower *per capita* GDP countries of Western Melanesia,

³ See Greg Fry.

⁴ Susan Windybank & Mike Manning, 'Papua New Guinea on the Brink', 2003, Issue Analysis, <http://www.cis.org.au/images/stories/issue-analysis/ia30.pdf>

⁵ Bryant Allen, Mike Bourke.

⁶ Judy Bennett. Though much abides.

⁷ Reilly, but cf Fraenkel, David Chappelle, and Morgan? On Vanuatu.

even if unstable coalitions, and fluid loyalties also characterize many of the micro-states, as do semi-authoritarian proclivities. In stark contrast to Western Melanesia, a single party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), that has sustained office in Samoa for more than a quarter of a century. The HRPP has manipulated cabinet size and party laws to weaken the opposition to such a degree that political scientists occasionally classify this as a 'semi-democracy'⁸. Nevertheless, elections have occurred at regular intervals, and the boundaries between the HRPP and its opponents have always been more fluid than many outsiders recognise. In a transition that gained insufficient international recognition, Tonga dramatically reshaped its constitutional arrangements in 2010 – ending the appointment of government by the King, empowering parliament instead to choose the Prime Minister and increasing popularly elected MPs from 9 to 17 in a 26-member chamber. The riots of November 2006, which destroyed much of the Nuku'alofa centre, galvanized political elites to retain a strongly centralized political system. The new government set in place after the 2010 election resulted in selection of a noble as Prime Minister, though the second election under the new system in November 2014 will prove a better test of longer-term direction. Tiny Nauru, with a population of less than 10,000, has seen more changes of government since independence even than Vanuatu. Like other Pacific nations, it experimented with modifications in constitutional design to stabilise governments (increasing the number of MPs to avoid deadlocks, and ending the practice of selecting the Speaker from within parliament), but more recently embarked on an authoritarian 'solution' by simply cutting the salaries of the opposition on the spurious grounds that they spoke too freely to the foreign media.

Focussing more narrowly on Western Melanesia and on the more serious scholarly interpretations, some have emphasised the authoritarian propensity of political elites – the so-called 'cultures of dominance'⁹. Yet the more frequent emphasis has been on the 'unruly', 'disordered', 'volatile', 'fluid' or 'fissiparous' character of Melanesian democracy. One of the most intriguing of these accounts of PNG's politics is Ron May's 'Disorderly Democracy: Political Turbulence and Institutional Reform in Papua New Guinea', which argues that parliamentary 'wheeling a dealing' in PNG has become so debilitating as to have generated a 'declining capacity of the state even to reproduce itself'¹⁰. Another widely cited effort to model Melanesian democracies was Jeffrey Steeves' 1991 characterization of Solomon Islands as a form of 'unbounded politics'¹¹, generalising from Solomon Mamaloni's spectacular *volte face* in 1990 when he abandoned his People's Alliance Party, but remained as Prime Minister by forging a new coalition with opposition members. Steeves' point was that Melanesian politics were too fluid to be characterized as 'clientelist', and that its

⁸ Iati Iati in JPH, and????

⁹ Michael Morgan, 'Cultures of Dominance'

¹⁰ Ron May, 'Disorderly Democracy: Political Turbulence and Institutional Reform in Papua New Guinea'

¹¹ Steeves, J 'Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments', *Pacific Studies*, 19, 1, 1996, pp. 115-38.

http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/sol_adobe_documents/usp%20only/Pacific%20law/Steeves2.pdf. See also the 2010 paper. And NB exceptionalism, but applied to Kenya

core characteristic was that it was *unbounded* by *political party* allegiances. Although this model was developed primarily for the Solomon Islands, it was explicitly to be applied also to Vanuatu and PNG.

Both the 'disorderly democracy' and 'unbounded politics' models are essentially *negative*, in the sense that they define PNG (Ron May) or Western Melanesia (Jeffrey Steeves) as opposite to an ideal type 'orderly' or bounded-by-party democracy. This is also true of those studies of Melanesia (and indeed Africa) that emphasise centrally that states are *not* Weberian 'rational-legal bureaucratic'. The argument in this paper is that these studies tell us more about what we do not know than what we do know. The dominant scholarly influences around the Pacific Rim have tended to come from Australasia and North America, both 'lands of recent settlement', where political arrangements have mostly been devised in ways that do not entail complex compromises with some pre-existing indigenous social order, even if that omission has two centuries later become more central to contemporary political discourse. Both Australia and North America in fact do have histories of 'disorderly', 'unbounded' or, to use Carothers' phrase, 'feckless' democracy, but these phases were mostly in the 19th century¹². Scholars from within Melanesia have been more inclined to emphasise the authoritarian proclivities of political elites¹³. This paper adopts a comparative approach with other eras or regions that possess some of the characteristic features of Western Melanesian democracy. It concurs with Steeves' rejection of 'clientelist' models, but suggests that we should instead characterize Western Melanesia as exhibiting a process of elite consolidation in contexts where leadership both at the local and national level is incessantly fleeting, precarious and contested.

When scholars talk about Papua New Guinea, or Western Melanesia more generally, as 'disorderly' or 'unbounded' democracies¹⁴, they tend to emphasise a number of interconnected issues: 'splintering' in electorates; 'fractionalization', 'fragmentation' and/or 'fluidity of party allegiances at the parliamentary level;

¹² Carothers, 'beyond the transition paradigm'. Between 1856-1901, Hawker reports that ten of the 29 New South Wales governments fell on 'direct motions of censure', and in 1880 almost half the MPs lost their seats (Hawker, *The Parliament of New South Wales, 1856-1965*, Ultimo, New South Wales, 1971, p21-25). 'Because factional bonds were weak, members deserted governments on particular issues further weakening the confidence of ministries in their own destiny. And ministries could not even control themselves, for ministers often voted against each other over particular issues. Such a chaotic system encouraged a dubious bidding for votes and so corruption, nepotism and patronage, and electoral malpractices were common'. Contemporaries talked of 'wild democracy and reckless change' (Lady Denison in 1860 in Hawker p21), and bemoaned that 'alignments were fluid, personalities were often more important than policies, and governments maintained in power by shifting, often heterogeneous, combinations of groups' (Louise Overacker, cited in Loveday, P & Martin, A.W. *Parliament Factions and Parties: the First Thirty Years of Responsible Government in New South Wales, 1856-1889* – Melbourne University Press, 1966, p1). In fact, historians question these 19th century verdicts, and point out that a stable core of politicians held office for long periods, with independents being responsible for much of the instability. Without implying some unilinear evolutionary political continuum, the same could also be said of Western Melanesia.

¹³ Alphonse Gelu, 'traditional authoritarian culture', and Rynenkiewitz?

¹⁴ Steeves, J 'Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments', *Pacific Studies*, 19, 1, 1996, pp. 115-38.

http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/sol_adobe_documents/usp%20only/Pacific%20law/Steeves2.pdf.

and, above all, 'instability' both as regards governments (i.e. a high degree of incumbent turnover) and more broadly as regards a propensity for deeper social crises and violence. For Australian and North American political scientists, as well as for Melanesian reformists, the causal chain has usually been identified as flowing from 'the political' to some broader level, rather than the other way around.

In empirical terms, attention has tended to concentrate on several interrelated features of PNG politics, most of which are also characteristic of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Stylized Facts

1. Rising numbers of candidates contesting elections
2. Falling victors majorities, due to vote-splintering
3. Proliferation of weakly institutionalized political parties as well as independents, and intense fluidity of party allegiances
4. High levels of incumbent turnover, with 50% or more MPs losing their seats at general elections.
5. Instability during Prime Ministerial elections, with loosely-knit camps vying for uncertain factional allegiances.¹⁵
6. Regular changes of Government, and even more regular 'no confidence' challenges (often driven by frivolous or venal motives), so that parliaments cannot fulfil their responsibility as legislative oversight institutions.

There are a variety of explanations offered for these characteristics:

1. Exceptional **ethnic heterogeneity**. Western Melanesia is the most ethno-linguistically diverse region on the planet. PNG has at least 820 known 'living languages'; Vanuatu 109 and Solomon Islands 70. Other diverse places on the planet, such as India, Burma pre-military rule, Indonesia, Afghanistan or Congo-Kinshasa/DRC pre- and post-Mobutu Sese Seko, also have or had highly fractured party systems. Yet there are two potential problems with (or false conclusions that can be drawn from) explanations centred solely on ethnic heterogeneity.

First, electoral or party cleavages do not neatly follow ethno-linguistic cleavages. Rivals often come from *within* the same clan, line or tribe. Nor do broader over-arching regional cleavages necessarily shape the party system. Indeed, these may be carefully avoided as politically dangerous. Hence, there is no homogenous 'Highlands' party in PNG. There may be a 'Malaita Maasina Forum' in Solomon Islands, but its members avoid establishing a Malaitan political party. Ethno-linguistic hyper-fractionalization is not mirrored in the party system in the same way as occurs as regards cleavages in more homogenous divided societies.

¹⁵ Okole, Henry., 'The "Fluid" Party System of Papua New Guinea', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 43, (3), 2005: 362-381

Second, there exist ethnically diverse nation-states, such as Tanzania, that do have reasonably robust political party systems. Countries with large numbers of political parties, such as Indonesia or India, may nevertheless have reasonably strongly institutionalized parties, as with India's Congress party for most of the post-war years. Clearly if we survey the range of highly diverse polities, military and/or authoritarian rule has been a frequent recourse, and its emergence has often been a direct reaction to secessionist threats or 'feckless democracy' (e.g. Indonesia, Burma, Congo-Kinshasa¹⁶).

2. **Absence of robust ideological cleavages.** In Melanesia, most political parties tend to emphasise similar issues, such as rural development or decentralization. Parties in government tend to adopt similar policy platforms, or dispense with contested policy positions in an effort to hold together unstable coalitions. As long as one leaves aside Fiji and New Caledonia, left-right cleavages centred on social class have never regulated party systems¹⁷. Differentiation centred on adherence to 'good governance' ideals, or opposition to corruption, has occasionally informed distinctions between parliamentary factions in Solomon Islands (e.g. Billy Hilly in Solomon Islands, 1993, Bart Ulufa'alu's 1997-2000 SIAC Government, both of which were forged in opposition to the 'Mamaloni men') or PNG (e.g. Morauta's 1999-2002 government, or the Bart Philemon break from Somare's 2002-7 government). Reformists often depict party systems as a struggle between 'developers' and 'diverters'¹⁸, but in practice most 'development-oriented' coalitions are cobbled together with wavering politicians, who readily switch sides in search of ministerial portfolios or cash. In the aftermath of the 1980 Santo

¹⁶ In the 1960s, politics in Zaire/DRC was often depicted as troubled by the "Nzinga syndrome" of the venal politician, whose vote was at auction for hourly rental'. In one popular song at the time – it was a 'pagaille (*disreputable shambles*)' (Young, Crawford. "Elections in Zaire: The Shadow of Democracy." Pages 187-212 in Fred M. Hayward (ed.), *Elections in Independent Africa*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press p200). As Young reports, 'The parties themselves proved in many instances to be ephemeral electoral alliances, subject to splintering in the manoeuvring for post-election favour and position. The fluid and fissiparous character of the system was highlighted in the confidence vote on the Lumumba government a week before independence; although he has stitched together a large cabinet including representatives of parties holding 120 of the 137 seats, only seventy-four votes in support of his premiership were cast' (Young, 'Elections in Zaire', p987.194). In Mobutu Sese Seko's first major speech as President, the long-term Zaire dictator justified his actions as follows: 'The very existence of the nation was threatened. Threatened on all sides, from the interior and exterior. From the interior, by the sterile conflicts of politicians who sacrificed the country and their compatriots to their own interests. Nothing counted for them but power And what the exercise of power could bring them. Fill their pockets, exploit the Congo and the Congolese, this was their trademark ... Both national and provincial administrations were mired with inertia, inefficiency, and worse yet, corruption' (President Mobutu Sese Seko, first major speech as President, 1965 cited Crawford Young 1987 p200).

¹⁷ Even in Fiji, that left-right cleavage was only important as regards the internal party cleavage within the Fiji Indian community (ie NFP vs FLP). In New Caledonia, it is a significant issue in the differentiation between Union Caledonienne and PALIKA.

¹⁸ A. V. Hughes, "Lessons from a False Dawn: Outcomes of the Solomon Islands Policy and Structural Reform Programme, 1997-2000", unpublished paper.

rebellion, Vanuatu witnessed a short-lived two-party type bifurcation around the Anglophone/Francophone cleavage, but this started to dissipate even in the late 1980s and early 1990s¹⁹.

3. **Institutionalist explanations** are often advanced for electoral and/or party fragmentation. In PNG, splintering of loyalties at the electorate level and weak party loyalties are often attributed to the adoption of a first-past-the-post system after independence. However, those same phenomena were evident under PNG's optional preferential voting system during 1964-72, and continue to be apparent since the switch to a limited preferential voting system in 2002. Vanuatu uses a multi-member SNTV system, but is also notorious for schisms in its party system.
4. **Culturalist (and/or relativist) explanations** often centre on traditional 'big man' forms of political leadership, echoed in the parliamentary arena, but originating in characteristic village-based leadership styles centred on accumulation and distribution. This weakness of political loyalties encouraged Francis Fukuyama to describe PNG and the Solomon Islands as 'perhaps the last pristine acephalous segmentary societies anywhere in the world'²⁰. Yet Melanesian societies are not leaderless, and the 'big man' leadership that develops in the urban parliamentary context is not identical to that studied by anthropologists in rural settings. What is similar is that leadership is permanently contested, countering the development of elaborate and durable patronage-based networks. The 'big man' system is often held to explain a distinct personalization in campaigning styles, both at the electorate level and in contests for the Prime Ministerial portfolio.
5. **Clientelist explanations** emphasise the venal motives of parliamentarians centred on acquisition of public goods, or the conversion of state funds into private assets, and grass roots linkages in

¹⁹ See Howard Van Trease, Michael Morgan.

²⁰ Fukuyama, Francis 'State-Building in Solomon Islands', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 23, (3), 2008, p3; Fukuyama, Francis., 'Observations on State-Building in the Western Pacific', 14th March 2007, fukuyama.stanford.edu/files/working.../WP_State-Building.doc. Fukuyama also claims of Solomon Islands that 'the wantok is simply the local version of what anthropologists call the segmentary lineage or descent group, which was at one point virtually universal in all human societies Segmentary societies could not meet the challenges of large scale social integration in a region characterized by persistent warfare and expanding trade' (Fukuyama, F., 'State-Building in the Solomon Islands', p2). 'Then most important weakness of a segmentary society is its inability to achieve collective action at a large scale for extended periods of time. Since there is no state – a sovereign source of political authority-cooperation is voluntary and consensual. Alliances can fall apart or are subject to renegotiation at any time. What is true at the level of society as a whole is true at the level of the individual lineage or descent group: the chief or big man is more of a trustee for the kindred rather than an authoritative leader. The kin group delegates authority to the chief only on a temporary basis and can challenge his authority whenever they wish. Segmentary societies are therefore very unstable and incapable of modern forms of legal delegation. The advantages of size and power conferred by state-formation explains why this form of political organization quickly displaced segmentary societies whenever they arose'

electorates centred on 'money politics'²¹. Yet where loyalties are so fleeting or feckless, both at the electorate and parliamentary levels, political relationships lack the critical 'iterative' component that is central to clientelist models²². There may be a great deal of *patronage* tied up with Melanesian politics, but it is less straightforward to identify who exactly the *clients* are. The better depiction is 'patrons without clients'.

- 6. Weakness of the state.** In PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the state is a remote presence. Populations largely inhabit rural areas, with little access to state services, such as clinics or schools. The classical model of European state-building is often seen as entailing the formation of robust states through warfare, followed subsequently by the development of accountability institutions of various types, including ultimately parliamentary democracy and the universal franchise²³. Modern state-building, by contrast, has entailed the development of weak forms of democracy prior to the creation of robust public administrations. One consequence is a pervasive localism, and an 'atrophied state', caught in a self-reinforcing cycle of centralization that serves primarily as a tool for de-centralization²⁴. However, this reasoning has been used, questionably, to justify a 'state first, democracy later' sequencing that implies an inherently progressive role for authoritarian modernizers (non-democratic 'developmental states') whereas most authoritarian experiments are neither developmentalist nor do they later become democratic²⁵.

Of those six potential explanations, 1 and above all 6 would seem to offer greatest explanatory power, but 3 and 4 also offer important insights. 2 & 5 would seem the least satisfactory, at least as regards accounting for our five core 'stylized facts'. A key issue is whether we take ethno-linguistic diversity (1) or acephalous leadership styles (3) as the key driver, or whether those features are themselves in some way connected to the weakness of the state.

Another key issue is whether those 'stylized facts' are permanent features of Melanesian polities, or temporary hallmarks of the early post-colonial order. After all, independence came less than half a century ago in all three countries: 1975 in PNG, 1978 in Solomon Islands and 1980 in Vanuatu.

²¹ Ron Duncan, Terence wood.

²² Allen Hicken 'Clientelism', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14, 2011, pp289-310.

²³ See Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and the European States, AD 990-1990*, Basil Blackwell, 1991.

²⁴ Fraenkel, Jon., 'The Atrophied State: An Analysis of Slush Funds' in Western Melanesia', Duncan, R (ed) *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific*, Asian Development Bank, 2011. pp303-326. <http://beta.adb.org/sites/default/files/political-economy-economic-reform-pac.pdf>; Paul Hutchcroft 'The Politics of Privilege: Assessing the impact of rents, corruption and clientelism on third world development', *Political Studies*, XLV, 1997, 639-658. See also Thomas Carothers work on 'feckless' democracy ('The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 1, 2002)

²⁵ Thomas Carothers, 'The "Sequencing" Fallacy', *Journal of Democracy*, 18, (1), 2007, 12-27; see also Jørgen Møller, 'Democracy First or State First? Historical Perspectives on the Sequencing Debate', paper delivered to the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, August 2014.

The less ambitious critical point in this lecture is simply to contest the usefulness of making 'disorderly' or 'unbounded' politics central to our investigations of Melanesian politics. The 'problem of order' or 'disorder' has a long and venerated intellectual tradition – reaching back to Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* and the functionalist anthropology of the mid-twentieth century, but it merely describes rather than explains the 'stylized facts' that most agree are central to any explanation of the drivers of Melanesian politics.

There is a second more obvious reason why the emphasis on 'disorder' is of little assistance as regards accounting for political trends in modern Melanesia.

All three Western Melanesian countries score well on international indices of parliamentary democracy (e.g. Freedom House). All have reasonably free judiciaries, and a relatively free press. All have an experience of regular elections, and change of governments (easily passing Samuel Huntington's well-known 'two turnover' test). Would-be authoritarian governments are regularly checked by various oversight institutions, legal action, or parliamentary challenges. Even in the midst of severe political crises, the law is often observed, oddly, in the breach²⁶. Politicians are regularly pursued by oversight agencies, including Ombudsmen and anti-corruption watchdogs, that check abuses of power. Unlike Fiji, Western Melanesia has no history of repeated destruction of the constitutional order. In PNG, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, the constitutional framework has remained intact since independence. Indeed, politics can be accompanied by a curious veneration of parliamentary protocol²⁷, even if its limits are sorely tested.

A third reason for rejecting the 'disorderly democracy' model is more time-specific and PNG-centred. Ron May's paper was written in the aftermath of an era of exceptional instability in PNG politics. The 1997-99 Skate government was a period of particularly acute instability in PNG, particularly after the expiry of the then Prime Minister's 'grace period' in 1999. Skate went to great lengths, ultimately unsuccessfully, to retain his grip on the country's highest office. The subsequent 2002 election was widely reported as PNG's worst ever²⁸. The government before Skate had collapsed as a result of the Sandline Mutiny, and the associated conflict on Bougainville. The 1990s was a decade of endemic instability, encouraging PNG's depiction as a 'disorderly democracy'.

Since 2002, there have been some important changes from the pattern of the 1990s. Sir Michael Somare's 2002-7 government was the first to survive a full parliamentary term. Somare was the first incumbent Prime Minister since

²⁶ As, during the 2011-12 crisis in PNG where competing parties sought to lay their respective claims before the Governor General, or in the Solomon Islands where a coup in June 2000 was followed by a prompt (if troubled) resumption of parliamentary democracy

²⁷ Joan Herlihy, 'Decolonization Politics in Solomon Islands: the Model that Never Was', in (ed) R May & H. Nelson, *Melanesia Beyond Diversity*, ANU Research School of Pacific Studies, Canberra, 1982.

²⁸ Standish, W 2003, 'Papua New Guinea's Most Turbulent Election', *Catalyst*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 130-148.

independence to successfully return to office after a general election. Although institutional explanations, in particular the change of electoral system and the new party strengthening laws, are occasionally offered as explanations for the longevity of the Somare governments, these are mostly implausible. More plausibly, the proceeds of a second mineral resources boom were more judiciously used to strengthen the governing coalition. Challenges were averted by a partisan Speaker suspending parliament for long periods, as well through careful disbursement of District Service Improvement Program grants. The Somare cabinet exhibited many of the signs of instability that had dogged earlier PNG governments; ministerial positions and the deputy Prime Minister's portfolio continually changed hands in response to the changing demands of managing the ruling coalition, even if the top job remained in one person's hands. Somare's National Alliance was able to impose a kind of order from above, and to trump opposition efforts to dislodge his coalition.

After the 2011-12 constitutional crisis, Peter O'Neill proved able to re-emerge as Prime Minister following the 2012 election, pursuing a hegemonic incumbent strategy that – in some respects – echoed that of Somare's National Alliance in 2002 and 2007. The provision granting the largest party first chance at forging a government removed much of the uncertainty characteristic of previous Prime Ministerial elections, but exacerbated the tendency for loosely affiliated MPs and small parties to rally to a powerful front-runner. O'Neill (unlike Somare) proved able to extend the grace period to 30 months after a general election, diminishing the size of the window during which there can be a government change to one and a half years in a five-year term. Judicious use of district support funds continued to be used to thin the ranks of the opposition, with all but two MPs switching allegiance to the government side in mid-2014. The result is not the robust two, or three, party system desired by the reformists who wanted to strengthen the party system, but it did impose a greater degree of order than had prevailed during the fractious 1990s.

Conclusion: The Problem with 'Disorder'

Identifying the difficulties faced in Melanesia as 'disorder', or 'unbounded' politics, or 'instability' tells us very little about what underpins Melanesian politics, but it nevertheless implies a set of solutions which focus on achieving 'order', 'stability' or stronger (more 'bounded') party loyalties. Many PNG reformists have looked to efforts to regiment the party system through devices such as PNG's 2001-3 Organic Law on Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), although key parts of that law have been subsequently declared unconstitutional by PNG's Supreme Court. Examining the practical workings of that law when it was operative, and the subsequent experience with what is left of those provisions, makes obvious that the real intent has been *government strengthening*, rather than *party strengthening*. In other words, the objective has been to increase 'executive dominance', although this is already a much-noted feature of the way parliaments in the region operate²⁹. That legislation has been

²⁹ Michael Morgan, 'Cultures of Dominance: Institutional and Cultural Influences on Parliamentary Politics in Melanesia', State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Program,

used in tandem with other devices, such as 'grace periods' and suspension of parliamentary sittings for long periods, to avoid the perennial threat of opposition challenges.

PNG's efforts in this regard have been echoed across the region, although legislation has acquired different forms, as with the Solomon Islands 2014 Political Parties Act.

A key advantage of parliamentary, as opposed to presidential systems, is that they permit the mid-term removal of unpopular governments. A key advantage of presidential, as opposed to parliamentary systems, is that they give the head of government a direct popular mandate³⁰. Arguably, PNG-style reforms leave Melanesian countries with the worst of both worlds: a system where governments are not directly elected, but nevertheless also cannot be changed on the floor of parliament. If experimenting with changes aimed at diminishing the possibility of mid-term removal of government, the alternative of a directly elected presidency merits greater attention, possibly on the Kiribati model.

The risk exists that if legislation such as OLIPPAC is in force, Melanesia may eventually face a major constitutional crisis with an unpopular government that cannot be removed because it is ring-fenced by rules forbidding no confidence votes. In those circumstances, the law may well simply not be enforced³¹.

This paper has suggested that what we are seeing in Melanesia is not 'disorderly democracy', but an uneven process of elite consolidation in highly heterogeneous contexts where leadership is continually contested.

End.

Discussion Paper, 2, 2005. [http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.AP/2004-05/D_P/05_02_dp_morgan\[1\].pdf](http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/.AP/2004-05/D_P/05_02_dp_morgan[1].pdf).

³⁰ Though many *presidents* are indirectly elected, most political scientists would only call a system 'presidential' where there are direct elections for the Head of Government.

³¹ As indeed was the case with OLIPPAC. The Ombudsman declined to take action on cases of MPs who switched sides illegally