

## **A Question To All Candidates For The November Elections: Do You Have The Courage Of Your Convictions?**

The backdrop to this year's national elections comes off the back of one of the worst natural disasters in our recent history. There have been more damaging natural disasters in the past; 1977 Earthquake, 1986 Cyclone Namu, and the 2007 and 2013 tsunami in the Western and Temotu Provinces, but none has hit Honiara more badly, and inflicted as much damage as the April floods. My thoughts and prayers go to the families that lost their loved ones in the flood. I shed tears as I read the story of Isaiah, of his survival and struggle to save members of his family. For such courage and bravery to be exhibited by someone so young is beyond description. There is something that we can learn from Isaiah and the other brave children who fought to save their families. Their lives will never be the same, but their strength and gallantry stands tall amongst men of courage.

The floods destroyed one of the last remaining vestiges of the Colonial era, the interface between our colonial past and our modern contemporary present- the famous Mataniko Bridge. For as long as many of us born in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate can remember, the Mataniko Bridge enjoined East and West Honiara. It connected the peoples from the two ends of Honiara. It was the gateway from the east to the west and west to the east. Its destruction may be an omen, and if symbols are to be believed perhaps there is an underlying message that can be inferred therefrom, that in order for us to forge forward into the new millennium with renewed vigour, foresight and energy, we should get rid of the old pathway and replace it with a new crossing that will enjoin our leaders to their people. I cannot help, but feel, that our political leaders have become aloof, distant, alienated and disengaged from their people, that they have forgotten how to walk across the Mataniko Bridge, to connect the two sides of Honiara, and link up with their people. They have become detached, evasive and avoid meeting their people because they are tired of being asked for money, sea fare, airfare, bus fare, school fees, repatriate deceased relatives, start up funds for projects and the list goes on *ad infinitum*! They have limited privacy, little time to spend with their children, to go over their homework, and no time to have a quiet meal with their families because their homes are constantly full, overcrowded with people coming and going, anytime of the day, 365 days in a year. Privacy is a premium, a luxury, and even where Ministers pin notices in their Office saying "constituency matters should be dealt with at home or at certain times of the day" constituents simply ignore them. It is no small wonder our political leaders have become indifferent and avoid the public out of fear they would be approached for money.

I have often been intrigued that whenever I walk the hot and often dusty roads in Honiara, by the market, across Lawson Tama and down to the Pt Cruz area, I have never once come across our political leaders walking, strolling or mingling in public. I once saw Sir Francis Billy Hilly sitting under a tree opposite the market on a Saturday but he is no longer in Parliament and does not have access any longer to the \$million discretionary funds and probably can afford to come out. However, I have seen some of them at the Heritage Hotel and the Pacific

Casino Hotel but I have never ever met anyone on the streets in Honiara. Political life creates an oddity out of good people. Thus, it bemuses me why despite the enormous pressures politicians face, the national elections always magnetises people no matter what their background might be. What is it that impel people to aspire to this high office that invariably has its high casualty of members who succumb to diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and stress, and even where they are unable to walk and have to be led and wheeled into Parliament they still cling tightly to the last remaining residue of power. Not too many people graduate from Parliament to become Advisers, Company Directors, International Consultants, and Eminent Persons hired by regional and international organizations and institutions for their knowledge and experience. Indeed, some appear worse for wear when they leave Parliament and look out of place. There is something about politics that draws people who have done it all, but still want to do it again. Is it because they have tasted its sweetness and despite it often being bitter sweet, they do not mind the loss of privacy, the agony of a full house, and the constant harassment by constituents for money?

We sit at the cross roads. Our general standards of living have declined. This is evident from the poor quality of the social and economic infrastructure across the country. Basic social services like clean running water and adequate medical and dental services are wanting; not merely wanting, seriously wanting, and in some instances, nonexistent. One might argue that there are services and the hospitals and schools are still operating. The response is yes, they might be operating but nowhere near the quality before and immediately after independence. The state of the roads, an important but, often overlooked aspect of business development, have deteriorated. The floods simply exacerbated what were already poor transport networks in the capital. Our level of aid dependency for development has also increased. This is evident in the number of international donor organizations now operating in the country and also the number of non-government organisations (NGOs) providing bridging support in areas overlooked by Government or for which it is unable to provide service delivery. Our human development index, a measure of the quality of skills available for growth is one of the lowest in the Pacific. Yet we are endowed with natural resources. We have gold, nickel, bauxite, timber, tuna, land, and huge tourism potential yet remain underdeveloped. Our literacy levels are low, yet we have built more schools and trained more teachers in the past 10 years than we have ever had in our history. We have had more University graduates in the past 5 years than we have ever had at any time in our history, yet many of them have not been able to be employed. We have increased the quantity of teachers and high school and university graduates but reduced the quality of their productivity. Our problem is not the lack of employment but the lack of employable skills that may be applied productively. Consequently we are unable to attract knowledge/skilled based investment to create more jobs. Thus, investments we are able to attract are in extractive industries like logging and fishing which are labour intensive and don't require specialized skills. With the decline in the logging industry and the closure of the Gold Ridge Mine, our economy is going to go into decline in the next few years with zero to negative growth rates which is only going to exacerbate the already high levels of unemployment in the country. The economic prognosis for

the next few years is a bleak one. There are no quick fix solutions and the problems I have articulated above in the areas of social services are likely to worsen. Combined with a population that is young and getting younger, with little prospects for finding jobs, we are sitting on a time bomb for a revolt. This time it will be a collective revolt aimed at our political leaders. It will not spearheaded by unemployed youths but by the wider civil society; the trade unions, teachers, nurses, public servants, students and essential services because everyone will be aggrieved and feel that the only way we can get our political leaders to listen is through direct and indirect confrontation.

In 2006 after the “Black Tuesday” riots I outlined reforms to Parliamentary elections and the election of the Prime Minister. Six years later, I shared the proposals with some MPs on restructuring Government to ensure Parliament retains its omnipotence as the supreme law making body in the land, but more importantly, to make sure that it can perform its duty as the arbiter on executive actions.

We are going into the 2014 national elections with the same fundamental problems. I would argue that even if the Political Integrity Act gets implemented, it would not address one of the fundamental flaws of our politics, indeed Melanesian politics, which is the crowding of Parliament by the Executive. I believe that for a small country like ours, the Prime Minister should be allowed to appoint his/her Executive from within and outside Parliament. The Executive is the policy-making arm of the Government. It is where key policies for social and economic progress and growth are made. The Executive at a minimum should consist of qualified people in the respective fields of their portfolios. Choosing the Executive from a limited pool available from Parliament often result in people who are not competent and have little knowledge of the subject of their Ministerial portfolio. Yet these are the people who are expected to lead major policy initiatives that have national and international ramifications. Somehow this system should be changed.

Will we see a change in the horse trading leading up to the election of the Prime Minister? Will we see a different behavioural pattern in the lead up to the election of the Prime Minister? Will we see MPs holed up in different Hotels all claiming to have the numbers? Will we see elected MPs wave a piece of paper waved showing the list of names of MPs pledging their support to candidates for the Prime Minister? Will we see a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) stating “we are intact and we have the numbers to be in the next Government”? These are the shenanigans we have seen in the past from our elected representatives to the highest decision making body in the land! Surely there should be a better way which reflects the integrity of the process and the dignity of the Office of the Prime Minister rather than making themselves a spectacle for the public consumption. When the current rules were developed, they were done so on the basis of a certain premise. They were designed by people who respected the rule of law and put the national interest above their own. It goes without saying that the processes of the election of the Prime Minister and the behaviour of our elected representatives and their cronies and supporters have mutated into farcical proportions and make our elected representatives look and behave like little children, and spoilt ones at that. This does not auger well for the integrity

and respectability of the high office to which they are elected. All these issues and their various implications were highlighted in those articles in the hope that they would generate public interest and debate and ultimately reform. There was none, but I will not give up on my sincere belief that there is a better and less confrontational but more stable means of Governing. I sincerely believe we desperately need political stability and for the sake of a better future, our government system and the way our Prime Minister is elected, and the composition of the Executive has to change. We cannot just simply tamper at the edges and hope that things will get better. There has to be a fundamental structural change to the organisation of the Executive.

The reason why we have to change the organisation of government is obvious. The current system is not working, it is not stable, it is not conducive to long-term planning, and creates too much uncertainty in governance. It will only get worse and with it, the social and economic wellbeing of our people. Corruption has become a central feature of our moral fabric, that it has corroded our society. Corruption is not confined to certain sectors of our society. It is pervasive and has permeated across a wide spectrum of our society including the higher echelons of Government. Even gardeners, drivers and cleaners if they can get additional benefit for something they do have succumbed to the tentacles of corruption. Corruption is also found in the villages. Chiefs and landowners (LO's) are also susceptible and are often aided and abetted by Asian logging companies. It is against the backdrop of declining levels of social services, government systems and governance arrangements that major structural reforms must, and should be pursued. While it may be argued that the systems are intact and are working, it masks the fact that in many instances it is working because of kickbacks, commission for services and overinflated contracts. These are not secret. They are public knowledge and openly admitted by public officers exasperated by the dishonesty of their colleagues. Indeed a current Government Minister unashamedly told a member of his constituent that he openly operates on a "you scratch my back, I scratch your back" basis. Everyone is on the take" he said, and "that is the only way you can survive". In my humble estimation, this Minister is not worthy of the public office he holds, but it sadly reflects the lack of sensitivity and regard for the public good that many of our politicians have become known for. It is this arrogance that will drive the next revolt.

If our politicians are not prepared to reorganise government and initiate these changes, who amongst us will initiate public discourse on these issues. Will it require public demonstration, another riot, another Chinatown burning, public outcry on social media or nationwide strike for our politicians to pay attention? In the past, our politicians have had the tendency to run to the Police to quickly quell plans to hold public demonstrations but there will come a time when even the Police will be reluctant to contain public discontent because they too will not tolerate their low wages, poor working conditions, poor and overcrowded houses, and poor conditions of service. There is a limit to human tolerance and at this time while most people can only talk about the abuse of public office there will come a time when our youths will take it upon themselves to redress these wrongs. The genesis of these revolutionary ideas is being propagated by our youths in social networks. The public demonstration by SINU students in 2013 is only a reflection of what they are capable of doing when pushed to a corner. These are

just the embryonic but could eventually morph into something bigger. The SINU and establishment of the USP Fourth campus is going to provide a critical mass to mobilise against injustice and deprivation of social and economic services because of the poor allocation of limited resources.

In my humble opinion here are some things that should be done: -

a) The government organisation structure and electoral rules should be changed so that MPs are elected by at least 51% of the voters. This should also include reforming the form and shape of the Executive. These reforms should be aimed at restoring the omnipotence of Parliament ensuring the strict separation of the three arms of Government, viz, the Executive, Judiciary and Legislature. An integral part of the reforms to the Electoral Act should include criminalizing the blackmailing of candidates during the campaign period. This will ensure that candidates are not unduly solicited for money and hopefully result in elections to be based on policies, rather than personalities and money! We should aspire to a higher standard of political behaviour and our people should learn that there is more to being an MP than being a source of funds. The application of discretionary funds by MP's should be removed and given to relevant Ministries. The improvement of people's social and economic welfare is not contingent on these discretionary funds. Indeed I think it might be difficult to evaluate the impact of these discretionary funds. The sad fact about these funds however is the unfair allocation of very limited resources to be decided by 50 people out of a population of 500,000. When put into context, assuming each MP has access to \$8 million a year, this equates to \$400 million a year. This is a lot of money. Over 4 years MPs have control of \$1.6 billion. If applied properly to a well designed development plan, this is more than enough money to meet our social and economic needs and provide some of the basic services that is lacking in many areas including my own at Munda. Our problem is not the lack of resources but the misallocation of the limited resources we have and the unashamed way in which our MP's have appropriated funds for themselves.

b) We should develop a 25 year Vision and Mission Statement setting out goals that we should aim to achieve within a generation. These include the total eradication of corruption by adopting a zero tolerance policy towards the abuse of office by public officers, corporations, landowners, church elders, leaders, teachers, community leaders and every Solomon Islanders. All schools should teach intolerance of corruption and teach respect and regard for your neighbours, communities and islands. In 25 years we should have a knowledge based society where everyone is literate not only in terms of reading and writing but also being computer literate as well. Broadband internet access should be made available to everyone so that it can be used as a tool to enhance knowledge, research and dissemination of information. This should be an integral part of the development of a knowledge based society. A concomitant development of a knowledge based society is improvements in governance, administration and processes in government services. It should have a flow on effect to improve efficiencies in the provision of services and facilitation of those services.

Our rapid population growth rate should be curtailed. We should aspire to graduate from aid dependency to economic self sufficiency and have a population growth rate that is commensurate with the ability of the economy to create jobs and provide adequate social and economic services. We should use aid to get out of aid dependency. In other words, we should apply aid to areas that would make us more independent. Being aid dependent saps our national pride and we lose our self respect because we have to rely on others to do things for us, rather than do things for ourselves. I agree with Dr. Helen Hughes that aid has not improved the social and economic wellbeing of Pacific islanders and indeed have only made us more dependent. We should be looking to graduate from being a Least Developed Country (LDC) to one in which we have the necessary skills in attracting investments in high tech industries. It can be done but it will take a generation to effectuate the education and skill development that we should instil in order to attract investments in areas other than the extraction of raw materials which are short-term, highly exploitative and dependent on low skill levels.

There should be total respect for the “rule of law”. It is obvious that respect for the “rule of law” has been lacking. This is because people see how our MPs behave towards government funds and imitate them. Respect for the “rule of law” is critical to our economic development. No one wants to invest or visit a country which is dirty and where people do not respect the rule of law. Honiara is a classic example of a place where respect for the “rule of law” is wanting. Houses are built anywhere, beetlenut stalls are constructed everywhere, beetlenut sellers openly defy the rule not to sell beetlenut along the streets, and buildings are not constructed to approved physical plans. There is an atmosphere of an “I do not care, I will do whatever I want to do” attitude. The consequence of this kind of anti-social, anti-regulation, anti-rule of law attitude is reflected by the filth, dirt, poor buildings, poor quality shops that are visible to everyone. This is what happens when there is a breakdown in respect for the “rule of law”.

Education is important not just for the quantity of people who go through the system but also the quality of the skills they bring to the work force. We should engineer a social programme whereby our best and brightest students are put through a school where they receive the best education, are taught by the best teachers, and provided with the best facilities for this cream of students. KGVI School use to be that institution where scholarship and leadership were taught. There is no reason why it could not transformed into such an institution where our best and brightest are taught leadership, management, entrepreneurial skills and sent overseas for specialised training with a view to bringing them back to key positions in the public and private sector. We need to identify our talented children and groom them for management and leadership positions and inculcate them with leadership skills and values. Singapore transformed itself by targeting individual students and targeted them for management positions. It is one of the reasons why it has become one of the success stories of Asia. We should an affirmative programme across the whole spectrum of our best students’ education.

Government should adopt a “greening of Solomon Islands” policy. Why don’t we have a programme to plant 1 million trees a year? This only requires 1 person to plant two trees a year to achieve this goal. Why do we want to do this? We want to do this both as a response to

mitigate the impact of climate change but also because it is the right thing to do. The protection and preservation of our environment is also critical if we want to develop our tourism industry. The tourism industry offers so much potential with the benefits from tourism flowing straight to the grass roots operators of “home-stay” facilities, “eco-lodges” and other small-scale tourism operators. No one wants to visit places denuded of their natural beauty. We have a lot of naturally beautiful places but these are being eroded by expansion into those areas by the expanding population. While on the subject of tourism, two of our so called tourism “hotspots” have been spoilt by the invasion of the wave of “New Chinese” economic rent seekers. I am referring here to Munda and Gizo. They are slowly becoming “ugly”, “hot” and “unattractive” places because of the buildings like the ones you see in Honiara. They are not built to any standard or codes, and have no aesthetic beauty about them. In fact, the beauty of Gizo and Munda are gone and should no longer be referred to as the “hub” of tourism

Government should put in place a policy to restrain the participation of these “New Chinese” in our commerce so that they don’t just become economic rent seekers which is how the Commission of Inquiry into the 2006 China Town riots describe them. These “New Chinese” have been partially responsible for the corrosion of government because of the way they bribe their way into the country and business. How else would they be allowed to operate business when many of them hardly speak a word of pidgin or English? Now this should be the first indicator that something is wrong. Furthermore, none of them are engaged in businesses that generate new money for our economy. They are just engaged in the retail sector basically selling the same goods and crowd out our Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian entrepreneurs who are more than capable of managing retail shops quite successfully. Should we just be spectators while they take over Honiara and the other urban centres like Munda and Gizo? Surely our national and provincial governments can impose restrictions, or quotas on the number of these new Chinese setting up businesses if they don’t allow themselves to be bribed. The public should be physically protesting but we are just silently and grudgingly accepting this invasion. There are allegations that the previous Western Provincial Government of Solini Lilo was badly compromised because he was taking money from these new Chinese. These allegations may hold some truth especially if you go to Gizo and see the same type of buildings in Honiara springing up in Gizo. Noro is also not being spared this invasion. Other Provincial Governments should heed what has happened in Honiara, Gizo and Munda and not allow this invasion into their Provincial capitals. One way in which controls may be imposed on these “New Chinese” is to require them to become members of the Chinese association. This is an organisation that predates independence and is deeply rooted in our values and commercial aspirations.

We need to find another niche for our development. Logging has been the downfall of our governments and the influence that they have had on several former and current MP’s is in part responsible for the corruption that is now pervasive. In order for us to forge ahead the 2025 vision should embrace improvements in education, promote gender equality, encourage private investment, mobilise liquidity in the financial system to domestic development, and establish a stock market whereby people can diversify their investment portfolios, all of which should be

overseen by an honest, impartial and transparent government. Other countries have done it thus there is no reason why we should not aspire for the same high ideals.

We should support gender equality and promote more women to decision-making positions including in Parliament. To me equal representation is not about “men” and “women”, it is about ensuring that the two major groups in our society are represented in Parliament to make decisions regarding our society, our children, our hospitals, our schools, our environment, and our security. Many people have suggested that it is undemocratic but since when has a system of government that we can devise for ourselves and agree that best represents our interest “undemocratic”. We can design any form of representative government we want including having equal representation of gender in Parliament, in Provincial Governments, in the public service, and in government owned corporations if we believe it will lead to better social and economic outcomes. I see this as a social justice issue, and not about “men” or “women”.

c) Much has been said about the background of intending candidates and MP's that they should be “educated” or that they should be “born again Christians”, and thus women and women of strong moral character. I do not believe these because the facts do not play themselves out. There is no correlation between having a “good education”, being a “Born Again Christian” and becoming an effective MP. This particular Parliament which is about to be replaced has the most number of university graduates since independence. They are MP's with Bachelor's Degrees, Masters Degrees, and even a Doctorate in Education. We have never had a Parliament with as many University Graduates at any one time as this particular Parliament. The Prime Minister has two degrees; a Bachelor of Economics degree from the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and a Masters in Development from the Australian National University (ANU). The ANU is one of the best Universities in the Australia and has an enviable international reputation. The MP for Central Honiara has 3 Degrees and would have had a Doctorate had he completed his research. Yet when you look at the National Parliament website, the number of Acts passed since 2010 has been the lowest of any Parliaments. They have hardly made a dent on our welfare. You can evaluate a Parliament's effectiveness by the number and nature of Legislation developed over the life of that Parliament Indeed, none of our highly educated MP's have ever left a lasting legacy. The four things that we continue to enjoy were introduced by MP's who didn't go to University. Solomon Taiyo Ltd (now Soltuna) and SIPL (now GPPOL) were negotiated by the late Sir David Kausimae; the National Provident Fund (NPF) was introduced by the late Anthony Saru; and Community High schools was introduced by Alfred Maetia. None of them went to University, yet their foresight and vision continue to benefit us so it is not true and in fact quite misleading that we should only have University Graduates as MP's.

The same can also be said about having “Born Again Christians” or “men or women of the cloth” as MP's. We have had Reverends, Pastors, Bishops and Priests in Parliament yet they have not made any difference. Politics is about “power” and how “power” is exercised. Our educated MP's and born again Christians and Church Ministers who become MP's all fall into the same trap and the vagaries of power. For many of them, it is the first time that they are exposed to those positions where they can exercise a lot of power. This is the single biggest

problem when they don't know how to handle their new found powers. The exercise of power can only be used in one of two ways. You can either "do good" or you can "abuse" it to enhance your personal interest. It is obvious that many of our educated and "born again Christian" MP's have used their power to enhance their personal interest. This has to be the case; otherwise we would have been better off long time ago. Why do you think MP's want to have their hands on development funds? The allocation of our limited financial resources by our MP's to themselves has got to be one of the most cowardly raids on the public purse; yet have any of our educated and Born Again Christians MP' moved a motion to do away with their discretionary funds? None of them have had the moral courage and conviction to say, "enough is enough", that the RCDF and other discretionary funds is not about "development", it is not about assisting their constituent but has got everything to do with maintaining power, even if it comes at the expense of our health and education services

We are good imitators so inevitably people are just copying the actions of our MP's. There is a percolating downstream effect on the public servants of our MP's actions. Contracts are inflated so that everyone gets a cut; commissions are expected for the awarding of contracts. A contractor told me that you have to include a contingency to pay off the accounts clerk in the line Ministry, then the people in Ministry of Finance, and so on. This is widespread and happens in every Ministry including some allege, the Prime Minister's Office! We have become one of the most corrupt countries in the world!

In my humble opinion, the only way this can be stopped is if a person elected to be Prime Minister decides to be totally selfless and refuses to be compromised. He/she may start by refusing to be given a government vehicle. This means that government Ministers too won't be given vehicles, and if Ministers don't have vehicles, their Permanent Secretaries should not have vehicles. When we see our Prime Minister drive him/herself to work we will feel 6 inches taller and take pride in their Leader. The Prime Minister should require government Ministers including him/herself to relinquish every business interest they have. No one, not a single Minister should own a business. This will ensure that they have no personal stake in any business and will not try and benefit from government contracts like some of the current MPs and Ministers have done. The Public Service should be revamped. We should bring people from outside to work in line positions in the government. We should be open to import skills and experience that isn't available locally. This means starting with a clean slate by having a wholesale replacement exercise through a competitive examination process. The basic law examinations that civil servants were required to sit before they could progress to the next level should be reintroduced. There are many graduates who are looking for work, but this wholesale change exercise should be conducted within a 20 year time frame. There has to be zero tolerance of inefficiencies and abuse of office and the only way this can be done is to start afresh with a clean slate. There is no other way of addressing this. We cannot afford to tinker with the Public Service on the edges. Addressing corruption will only be done if our Prime Minister, the Political Leader of the country, the Leader of the Executive, the Chief Policy initiator decides that the downward spiral of our governance and public services in health, education, forestry, labour and

immigration is enough. That is when you will find a sea change. That is when you will see us walk around 6 feet tall because we will be proud of our Leadership. And as good copy cats and imitators, our respect for the rule of law, respect for our government, respect for our public servants, respect for our MP', respect for our flag, respect for our Coat of Arms, respect for our National Anthem, and respect for each other will be restored.

The lack of government presence is a problem that should be addressed. There is no longer any local government councils, nor effective district administration, and extension services where they do exist if often erratic. The only extension services that are active are in health but these are highly dependent on the availability of funds. Local level council administration should be restored to work alongside Council of Chiefs where these exist. The district administrators should work with the Council of Chiefs to identify their social and economic needs, report on the state of roads, schools, and water supplies. The village courts should be revived, together with Village headmen/women/organisers and a bigger role given to the Council of Chiefs as an integral part of the national governance structure. This should address one of the fundamental flaws in our governance which is the lack of government presence in the communities and restore respect for our government.

The question that I ask of our candidates in the forthcoming elections is how many of you are contesting on the premise of this basic conviction for the future prosperity, stability, and development of our beautiful country, and how many of you have the moral courage to bring about the necessary legislative, regulatory and policy changes that our beautiful country and people so desperately need to propel us forward in this millennium.

Dr. Transform Aqorau<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These are my personal views. This article was written on Saturday April 24, 2014 on board the purse seine Fishing Vessel FV Lojet while fishing in the waters of Kiribati and Nauru. Those quiet times in the vast ocean offered the peaceful bliss to reflect on the challenges facing the next Government.