PNG at Loggerheads

Some years ago I walked through rainforest in Papua New Guinea’s Oro province with Lionel Jandu, a young man who later became provincial Premier. He was sizing up timber for a house.

After we had walked a couple of kilometres through what appeared to be dense, undifferentiated bush, he said, “This is my land now. I’ll choose between one of those three trees over there.” Today, that forest’s existence is threatened by logging.

PNG has been an ecological battleground for many years, from well before the environment became a dominant Western social and political focus. The constitution, adopted at independence in 1975, pursues a strongly ‘integrationist’ theme, drawing together social, economic and spiritual values. Its chief architects were Fr John Monis, MP for Bougainville, Minister for Provincial Affairs and leader of the Melanesian Alliance, and John Kaputin, MP for Rabaul.

PNG moved early to prevent its unique wildlife, such as Birds of Paradise, and the Dugong, from being hunted by other than traditional means. And it established a successful pattern of crocodile farming which preserved the species.

Industrial pollution has scarcely registered as a problem. The problem, rather, has been the country’s failure to sustain economic activity, let alone to grow sufficiently to satisfy the job aspirations of the 40,000 young people leaving school annually. Only 6,000 jobs are available for them.

Nevertheless, the eccentric MP Hugo Berghuser, a German pig-farmer-cum-cabinet maker turned property developer and PNG politician, succeeded in defying the inconvenient health and pollution regulations required by the Port Moresby authority when he built a meat cannery in partnership with an Australian major. He built it next to his Disney-style schloss, just outside the city limits, where few rules applied.

In the late 1970s, a lobby combining young Papua New Guineans with embryonic Australian ‘greenies’ defeated plans to build a huge hydroelectric plant astride the Purari River in Gulf province.

The rate of population growth, at almost 3% one of the world’s highest, has caused particular pressure on land use in parts of the Highlands, with traditional slash-and-burn agriculture decreasingly feasible. Any flight over PNG nevertheless crosses great tracts of rainforest, one of the world’s larger surviving resources with south-east Asia having been substantially milled out this century. This has been the prime source of wealth for a core group of politicians and their henchmen.

Timber companies, on the surface, have not fared so well. A handful of Japanese loggers and woodchippers, operating for several years in PNG, have apparently done so out of philanthropy, since they have not made sufficient profit to pay tax. More recently, a cohort of Malaysian, Singaporean and Indonesian companies has moved in following the banning of log exports from those countries. And while agreements, often containing stringent conditions including the provision of infrastructure, reforestation and downstream processing were signed, the national government had little power and less intention to enforce them.

Sir Julius Chan, now deputy Opposition leader, pushed through parliament more than ten years ago his Private Dealing Act whereby landowners could negotiate, as an alternative, directly with timber companies. Predictably, loggers have favoured such a route where pliable local leaders can be identified and accommodated.

Following a series of articles in The Times of PNG, the government of Paias Wingti launched an inquiry into the timber industry. To head it, they chose - perhaps as unwittingly as Bill Gunn chose Tony Fitzgerald - Justice Tos Barnett.

His massive, thorough inquiry indicted the system and many individuals who had operated it, notably then Forests Minister and former General Ted Diro. However, Diro shifted his 14-strong Papuan bloc of MPs across to Rabbie Namaliu in July 1988 before any prosecutions were initiated. He became the kingmaker. And since Wingti is today also looking for Diro to move to shift the balance back his way, Diro has remained untouched.

The clear-felling continued apace under his successor Karl Stack. But with most of the accessible, attractive timber stands already leased, and with the World Bank (on whose good-will PNG substantially depends to bridge its balance of payments gap following the closure of the Bougainville mine) forced by its members to adopt tougher environmental guidelines, the strategy abruptly shifted last month.

At a meeting in Port Moresby of a tropical forest action program team led by the World Bank, Stack announced a two-year moratorium on new timber permits from July. Permits, he said, would be held in future by landowners, who would receive all royalties. Compensation for foreign logging, he added hopefully, would be sought from overseas.

This reinforces the trend propelled by developments on Bougainville whereby, in effect, the national government is rapidly withdrawing from its essential role embodied in the Eight Aims promulgated at independence - the role of redistributor of wealth and deliverer of services. Now, advantaged landowners are being given virtual carte blanche to determine projects given access to their areas, and to withhold the accruing benefits.
On Bougainville, the victory of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, and the paralysis of Port Moresby as it relies de facto on an informal blockade to restore sovereignty over the island, has been accompanied by a crucial change in approach.

The BRA appears to be prepared to live with a mine - as long as Bougainvilleans have a bigger say, and a bigger take. And although other interests, the rebels believe, are just waiting in the wings to take on the mine, CRA with a 53% holding, is unlikely to quit early. The mine owes no debt, and has a potential life of at least another 15 years.

It, and other miners, such as BHP at Ok Tedi, feel unfairly targeted by interest groups seeking enhanced revenues from resource companies that have met their agreed obligations with the national government - while the loggers have escaped scot-free, partly because they have freely resorted to corruption.

It is, however, easier to see the difference in a mined landscape than the more subtle and insidious effect of the loss of topsoil due to logging.

It is not only the physical environment that is forever changed by such projects, however - on which the PNG economy today desperately depends - but the human environment too. Structures previously fluid, subject to frequent fights and exchanges, were frozen in the colonial era. The sudden rush of cash serves to defrost these structures, opening the way for renewed leadership struggles.

Thus, on Bougainville, emblematically, the war that began with a mine is ending with unanswered questions about where authority legitimately resides.

"Logic," said a young landowner at an angry meeting in November 1988 to consider a survey of the environmental impact of the Bougainville mine that fired the civil war there, "is a white man's trick".

If there is a 'Melanesian' alternative to logic, it needs to be used with un-Melanesian speed. For the greater the deterioration of the the economic and social infrastructure on Bougainville, the less fastidious will be the emerging leaders about how revenue is raised.

Attitudes of industrial and developing societies differ on the use of the environment and on its very meaning in daily life. And Papua New Guineans are caught between maintaining their traditional values, while insisting on their right to those paths to development which countries like Australia have already trodden.

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Striking Accord

Ten months ago, a conservationist and a forester went for a ride in a plane over some Tasmanian forest. When they returned, they had struck a deal on a number of issues that have split Tasmania for 30 years.

In June, one of Tasmania's largest company's, Australian Newspnt Mills (ANM), will release the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on its proposal to build a $600 million lightweight coated paper mill at Boyer. The EIS will be presented after perhaps the most intense period of public consultation ever allowed by a Tasmanian company. Most remarkable was that ANM made the initial approaches to consult with the conservation movement.

A new era of consultation is dawning in Tasmania. The historic aerial conversation between conservationist Geoff Law and forester Shane Murphy coincided with the Salamanca talks - discussions between conservation, government, business and union interests that reflect a maturing of relations between long-time conflicting conservation and industry interests.

"All it took was the ability to sit down and recognise the legitimacy of the other point of view", said Alan Evans, head of Premier Field’s office. "This is a new approach for ANM and for the whole forest industry," according to David Quinn, public affairs manager for ANM. For the first time they (conservationists) are giving us a fair hearing and ANM has been prepared to admit publicly where it has not done a good job in the past. This is a major cultural breakthrough."

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A further indication of ANM's newfound commitment to consultation
will be the announcement of a site for its recycling mill in late April. The two most likely sites are Albury, halfway between Sydney and Melbourne, or Boyer, Tasmania, the site of the new $600 million paper mill. That Boyer is the preferred site of the Tasmanian Greens is not lost on ANM management. Quinn admitted it was even an advantage for the success of the new $600 million paper mill proposal.

What has made all this possible? The blueprint for consultation (and, it was hoped, consensus) was set within two weeks of the state election last April. The Labor-Green Accord, between five Green Independents and a minority Labor government was to provide a mechanism for open administration and consultation with community groups.

Is it working? In terms of sheer achievements since last April, the answer would have to be yes. The Accord can claim credit for a new national park, world heritage nominations covering 20% of Tasmania, a cancelled fourth export woodchip mill, and no increase on the state’s export woodchip quota.

The Accord set up the forum for the Salamanca talks to consider the fate of Tasmania’s natural resources. Those talks created a cooling down period between opposing interests and allowed logging to continue in designated areas for 12 months to work out which areas are most in dispute.

But are Labor and the Greens really in Accord? On closer inspection it seems not. The Accord was written in a hurry to appease mounting concern in the electorate after an inconclusive election and to head off plans by previous Liberal Premier Gray to force a deputation to Canberra, asking for $13 million, scored $10 million for research into alternative forestry industries - plantation growth, thinning and re-growth to increase sawlog production, and efficiency measures in industry.

Specific economic issues have been taken up by the Greens. They have challenged the government on its refusal to publicly release bulk power prices charged to companies in Tasmania. In mid-April the government relented but would only release prices in broad categories for reasons of commercial sensitivity. The state’s 21 bulk power consumers use 66% of the electricity. The Greens claim that at least four of these companies receive huge discounts on their power prices, at the expense of the general consumer.

Similarly, criticism for its reluctance to increase royalty payments from mining has met a blank from the Labor government for fear of companies shedding more jobs. Tasmania’s royalties are the lowest in Australia. According to Wilderness Society documenta, in 1986-87 Tasmania received $1.6 million in royalties on $415 million of minerals, or 0.37%.

“The Hellyer Mine, which is just about to hit full production of silver, lead and zinc is worth $4.6 billion. The company is believed to be making a profit of $70 million a year. The investment was $112 million and it produced about $120 million income the first year.

But Tasmania is entitled to only $3 million royalties”, said the society’s research officer Bob Burton. “If they gave us more information we’d find them about $50 million a year that could be redirected into other areas of the economy.”

All parties agree there are no definitive answers to environmentally friendly industries that don’t cost jobs. But despite the battles still to be fought, a start is being made - and maybe the plane rides should be compulsory.

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"Like an iceberg, stalinism froze and preserved the social viruses of the past", argues Hungarian playwright and social critic IstvÁn Ëorsí. "Now that that iceberg has melted, those viruses have come to life again."

In Hungary, where stalinism has been thawing since the ‘sixties, historical patterns and long-latent national sentiments re-emerged strikingly intact in the country’s first free parliamentary elections since 1947. After two rounds of voting, March 25 and April 8, the victory of the Christian-conservative coalition led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF) ended a nasty campaign marked by anti-semitism, red-baiting and nationalist demagoguery.

The election exposed the deep historical antinomies between the political cultures of Western liberalism and conservative nationalism that confronted one another in Hungary, and throughout post-communist Eastern Europe.

The Forum’s eclectic brand of populism, christian democracy and nationalism struck a familiar chord in Hungary. Having captured 165 of the 386 seats, the HDF is set to form a government in partnership with the Independent Smallholders Party.

The Alliance of Free Democrats (AFD), who finished neck-and-neck with the Forum in the first round, wound up with only 92 seats (24%) after the second ballot. Despite minimal differences between the economic programs of the two parties, the HDF ruled out a coalition with the Free Democrats, whose leadership includes many intellectuals, former dissidents and Jews.

Although grave economic and social crises face the country, the campaign was largely devoid of political content. The HDF relied primarily on nostalgic and nationalist themes neglected in the communist era. Top billing went to the emotionally charged Transylvania issue, the ‘revitalisation’ of the Magyar identity and, above all, the character smear of the AFD.

The Forum’s direction and the traditions that it embraces raise justified concern over the form that democracy will take here, particularly in the absence of a traditional democratic culture.

The organisation was founded in 1987 by 160 intellectuals and professionals, led by the reform wing of the Communist Party, as a loose umbrella movement in opposition to the ruling hardliners. Over the past year, the Forum, now a party, has moved steadily to the right, with a stress on Christian values under its president and now the Prime Minister-elect, József Antall. Its tradition is romantic, with an anti-modern yearning for a mythical past and rural peasant culture.

One of the most outspoken representatives of the that tradition in HDF is the author István Csurka, whose anti-semitic innuendos and hysterical essays have provoked a flood of criticism. He argues for a strong ‘Hungarian’ leadership to rescue the country from its present ‘state of anarchy’.

Although most of the present leadership refrains from Csurka’s crass style, it refuses to distance itself from the poet-propagandist and other extremists. The moderates’ testy defence of its ultra-right elements reflects the lack of internal debate and self-criticism within the party, for which it has often come under fire.

Despite its own heavily ex-Communist membership and its roots in the party, the Forum’s top brass itself is quick to associate the Free Democrats with former stalinist leaders of Jewish origin, such as Mátyás Rákosí and Károly Grosz. The Free Democrats’ ‘cosmopolitan’ leaders, their rivals insinuate, is ‘foreign’ and ‘other’ to the true spirit of the Hungarian people.

The loaded words fall on fertile ground. “Well, you know, those Free Democrats are a bunch of Jews”, is a common, if mild response. The AFD’s election posters, many depicting the candidates themselves, have been covered in anti-semitic and fascist graffiti.

HDF’s policies and style have deep roots in the historical resentment and thwarted nationalism that is embedded in the national consciousness here. Most Hungarians are only too eager to recount their country’s lost glory, its territory reduced by two-thirds and 60% of its population lost to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia under the post-World War One Trianon Peace Treaty.

The persecution of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania (culminating in the deaths of three ethnic-Hungarians in the Transylvanian town of Tirgu Mures in March) has been portrayed as Hungary’s own national tragedy, dwarfing all other issues as the Forum’s number one election theme.

The recent pogroms there have fuelled a storm of nationalism, which the party has milked for every ounce of emotion through its belligerent attacks on the Romanian government and people.

Some observers see the HDF developing into a party like the Bavarian Social Christian Union. However, the escalation of national tensions in Romania and Yugoslavia puts a Forum-governed Hungary into a different perspective, warns Ëorsí. "If the fascist movement cannot be stopped in Romania, then the whole region is going to be subject to the outbreak of ultra-right movements”, says the former dissident. “For every Hungarian beaten on the streets of Tirgu Mures, 20 new Csurkas arise
here. In this atmosphere, hate and intolerance can spread like a plague.

The HDF rationalises political, economic and cultural relations with South Africa, initiated by the ruling Communist Party last year. Antall ducks the question of international sanctions, responding defensively and noticeably irritated at a recent press conference: "Let me put the question another way. When did the international community ever protest against the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania?"

The party's Christian values are based on the Ten Commandments and specious historical claims that Hungarians are a 1,000 year-old democratic people. The religious influence, as well as concern over the falling birthrate, informs HDF's positions on women's issues. The party objects to abortion on principle, although it has not yet called for changes in the existing laws which protect the right. Rather, it advocates a "Magyarisation of new morality" and a "re-education of society", in which the "passing on of human life is of the highest value".

The family theme is dominant in the kitsch campaign posters plastered across the country. In one, a five year-old, blonde and blue-eyed boy stares open-mouthed into the distance. Another uses a sentimental watercolour of a pregnant woman. Under both, the message: "A Hungarian future".

The success of the Magyar crusade, however, depends on the longevity of the shaky coalition. With hard times ahead, Hungary's Western benefactors had hoped for a broad coalition to ensure stability and prompt debt repayment.

Instead, the Forum opted for an alliance with the weak and badly-organised Smallholders and Christian Democrats, both right-wing historical parties resurrected for the vote but with next to no program or political experience.

The Free Democrats, nurtured in the culture of opposition politics, are certain to run rings around their clumsy opponents in parliament. In contrast to the sharp and charismatic AFD leaders, the HDF's representatives appear provincial and bumbling. After years of collaboration with the old regime, the Forum's convoluted logic and long-winded efforts to circumvent concrete issues bear the mark of its heritage.

Unfortunately, the Free Democrats do not constitute a left opposition to the country's tutelage to the IMF and Western investors. But as the stalinist iceberg melts, the ills of Western liberalism look less malignant than the threat of war in Central Europe. Once the dialectic of nationalism has been set in motion, however, the moral protests of Eastern Europe's liberals may perish quickly in the blaze of irrationality that nationalism ignites.

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